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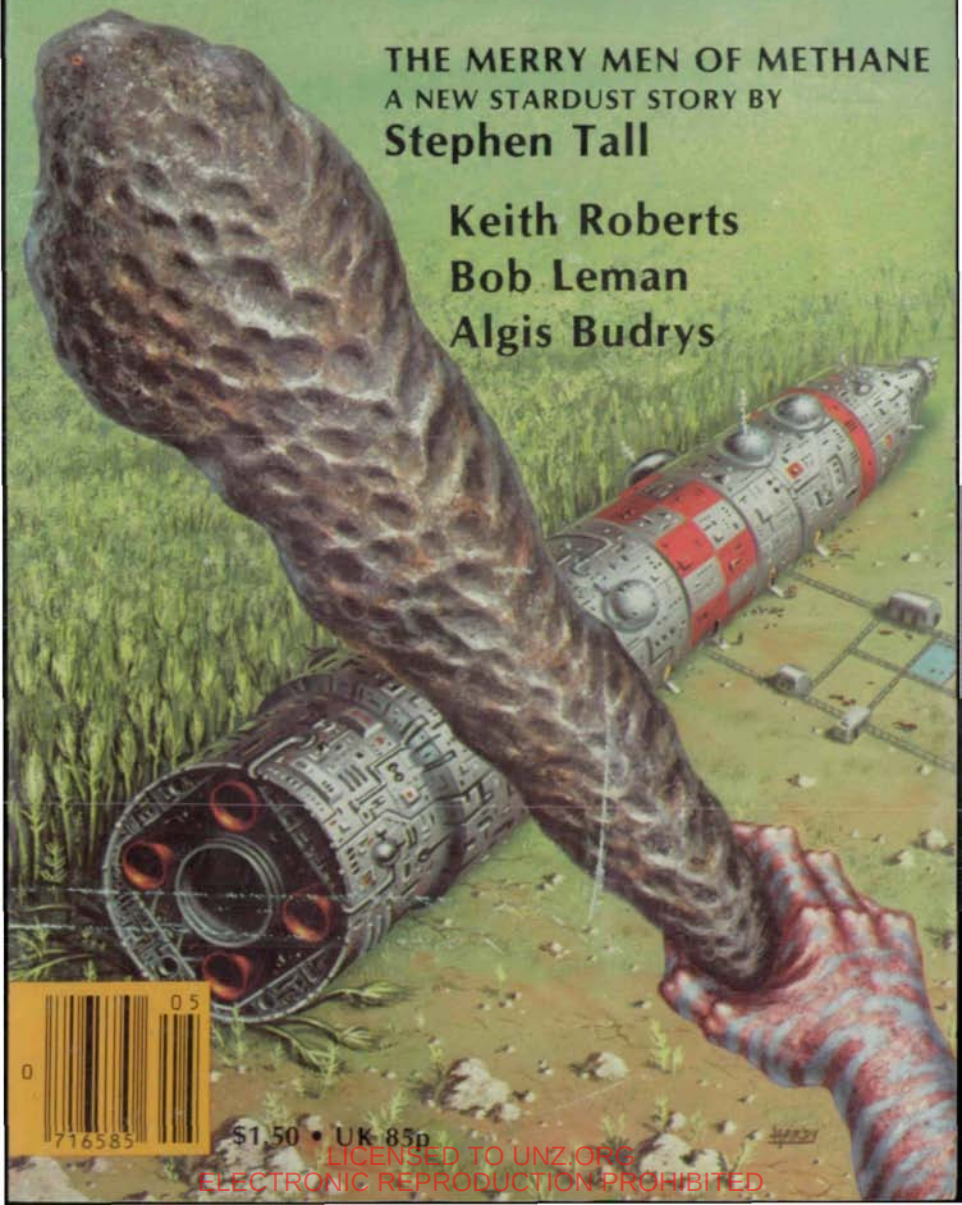

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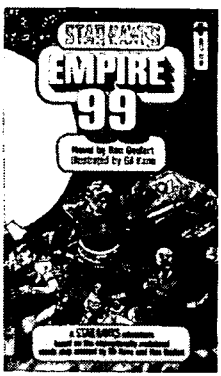

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COVER BY DAVID HARDY FOR "MERRY MEN OF METHANE"

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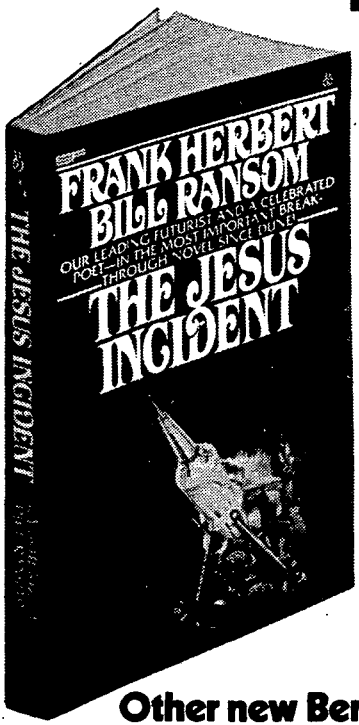
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Bob Leman wrote "Loob," (April 1979) and "Change of Address," (September 1979). His new story is about a military project which is investigating telekinesis and which experiences an incredible accident: the disappearance of an entire building, along with one researcher, and the appearance, in its place, of something strange which is not exactly what it appears to be.

Window

BY

BOB LEMAN

"We don't know what the hell's going on out there," they told Gilson in Washington. "It may be pretty big. The nut in charge tried to keep it under wraps, but the army was furnishing routine security, and the commanding officer tipped us off. A screwball project. Apparently been funded for years without anyone paying much attention. Extrasensory perception, for God's sake. And maybe they've found something. The security colonel thinks so, anyway. Find out about it."

The Nut-in-Charge was a rumpled professor of psychology named Krantz. He and the colonel met Gilson at the airport, and they set off directly for the site in an army sedan. The colonel began talking immediately.

"You've got something mighty queer here, Gilson," he said. "I never saw anything like it, and neither did anybody else. Krantz here is as mystified as anybody. And it's his baby. We're just security. Not that they've needed any, up to now. Not even any need for secrecy, except to keep the public from laughing its head off. The setup we've got here is—"

"Dr. Krantz," Gilson said, "you'd better give me a complete rundown on the situation here. So far, I haven't any information at all."

Krantz was occupied with the lighting of a cigar. He blew a cloud of foul smoke, and through it he said, "We're missing one prefab building, one POBEC computer, some medical machinery, and one, uh, researcher named Culvergast."

"Explain 'missing,'" Gilson said.

"Gone. Disappeared. A building and everything in it. Just not there any more. But we do have something in exchange."

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"And what's that?"

"I think you'd better wait and see for yourself," Krantz said. "We'll be there in a few minutes." They were passing through the farther reaches of the metropolitan area, a series of decayed small towns. The highway wound down the valley beside the river, and the towns lay stretched along it, none of them more than a block or two wide, their side streets rising steeply toward the first ridge. In one of these moribund communities they left the highway and went bounding up the hillside on a crooked road whose surface changed from cobblestones to slag after the houses had been left behind. Beyond the crest of the ridge the road began to drop as steeply as it had risen, and after a quarter of a mile they turned into a lane whose entrance would have been missed by anyone not watching for it. They were in a forest now; it was second growth, but the logging had been done so long ago that it might almost have been a virgin stand, lofty, silent, and somewhat gloomy on this gray day.

"Pretty," Gilson said. "How does a project like this come to be way out here, anyhow?"

"The place was available," the colonel said. "Has been since World War Two. They set it up for some work on proximity fuzes. Shut it down in '48. Was vacant until the professor took it over."

"Culvergast is a little bit eccentric," Krantz said. "He wouldn't work at the university — too many people, he said. When I heard this place was available, I put in for it, and got it — along with the colonel, here. Culvergast has been happy with the setup, but I guess he bothers the colonel a little."

"He's a certifiable loony," the colonel said, "and his little helpers are worse."

"Well, what the devil was he doing?" Gilson asked.

Before Krantz could answer, the driver braked at a chain-link gate that stood across the lane. It was fastened with a loop of heavy logging chain and manned by armed soldiers. One of them, machine pistol in hand, peered into the car. "Everything O.K., sir?" he said.

"O.K. with waffles, Sergeant," the colonel said. It was evidently a password. The noncom unlocked the enormous padlock that secured the chain. "Pretty primitive," the colonel said as they bumped through the gateway, "but it'll do until we get proper stuff in. We've got men with dogs patrolling the fence." He looked at Gilson. "We're just about there. Get a load of this, now."

It was a house. It stood in the center of the clearing in an island of sunshine, white, gleaming, and incongruous. All around was the dark loom of the forest under a sunless sky, but somehow sunlight lay on the house, sparkling in its polished windows and making brilliant the colors of

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massed flowers in carefully tended beds, reflecting from the pristine whiteness of its siding out into the gray, littered clearing with its congeries of derelict buildings.

"You couldn't have picked a better time," the colonel said. "Shining there, cloudy here."

Gilson was not listening. He had climbed from the car and was staring in fascination. "Jesus," he said. "Like a goddamn Victorian postcard."

Lacy scrollwork foamed over the rambling wooden mansion, running riot at the eaves of the steep roof, climbing elaborately up towers and turrets, embellishing deep oriels and outlining a long, airy veranda. Tall windows showed by their spacing that the rooms were many and large. It seemed to be a new house, or perhaps just newly painted and supremely well-kept. A driveway of fine white gravel led under a high porte-cochère.

"How about that?" the colonel said. "Look like your grandpa's house?"

As a matter of fact, it did: like his grandfather's house enlarged and perfected and seen through a lens of romantic nostalgia, his grandfather's house groomed and pampered as the old farmhouse never had been. He said, "And you got this in exchange for a prefab, did you?"

"Just like that one," the colonel said, pointing to one of the seedy buildings. "Of course we could use the prefab."

"What does that mean?"

"Watch," the colonel said. He picked up a small rock and tossed it in the direction of the house. The rock rose, topped its arc, and began to fall. Suddenly it was not there.

"Here," Gilson said. "Let me try that."

He threw the rock like a baseball, a high, hard one. It disappeared about fifty feet from the house. As he stared at the point of its disappearance, Gilson became aware that the smooth green of the lawn ended exactly below. Where the grass ended, there began the weeds and rocks that made up the floor of the clearing. The line of separation was absolutely straight, running at an angle across the lawn. Near the driveway it turned ninety degrees, and sliced off lawn, driveway and shrubbery with the same precise straightness.

"It's perfectly square," Krantz said. "About a hundred feet to a side. Probably a cube, actually. We know the top's about ninety feet in the air. I'd guess there are about ten feet of it underground."

"'It'?" Gilson said. "'It'? What's 'it'?"

"Name it and you can have it," Krantz said. "A three-dimensional television receiver a hundred feet to a side, maybe. A cubical crystal ball. Who knows?"

"The rocks we threw. They didn't hit the house. Where did the rocks go?"

"Ah. Where, indeed? Answer that

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and perhaps you answer all."

Gilson took a deep breath. "All right. I've seen it. Now tell me about it. From the beginning."

Krantz was silent for a moment; then, in a dry lecturer's voice he said, "Five days ago, June thirteenth, at eleven thirty a.m., give or take three minutes, Private Ellis Mulvihill, on duty at the gate, heard what he later described as 'an explosion that was quiet, like.' He entered the enclosure, locked the gate behind him, and ran up here to the clearing. He was staggered — 'shook-up' was his expression — to see, instead of Culvergast's broken-down prefab, that house, there. I gather that he stood gulping and blinking for a time, trying to come to terms with what his eyes told him. Then he ran over there to the guardhouse and called the colonel. Who called me. We came out here and found that a quarter of an acre of land and a building with a man in it had disappeared and been replaced by this, as neat as a peg in a pegboard."

"You think the prefab went where the rocks did," Gilson said. It was a statement.

"Why, we're not even absolutely sure it's gone. What we're seeing can't actually be where we're seeing it. It rains on that house when it's sunny here, and right now you can see the sunlight on it, on a day like this. It's a window."

"A window on what?"

"Well — that looks like a new house, doesn't it? When were they building houses like that?"

"Eighteen seventy or eighty, something like — oh."

"Yes," Krantz said. "I think we're looking at the past."

"Oh, for God's sake," Gilson said.

"I know how you feel. And I may be wrong. But I have to say it looks very much that way. I want you to hear what Reeves says about it. He's been here from the beginning. A graduate student, assisting here. Reeves!"

A very tall, very thin young man unfolded himself from a crouched position over an odd-looking machine that stood near the line between grass and rubble and ambled over to the three men. Reeves was an enthusiast. "Oh, it's the past, all right," he said. "Sometime in the eighties. My girl got some books on costume from the library, and the clothes check out for that decade. And the decorations on the horses' harnesses are a clue, too. I got that from—"

"Wait a minute," Gilson said. "*Clothes?* You mean there are people in there?"

"Oh, sure," Reeves said. "A fine little family. Mamma, poppa, little girl, little boy, old granny or auntie. A dog. Good people."

"How can you tell that?"

"I've been watching them for five days, you know? They're having — *were* having — fine weather there — or then, or whatever you'd say. They're nice to each other, they *like* each

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other. Good people. You'll see."

"When?"

"Well, they'll be eating dinner now. They usually come out after dinner. In an hour, maybe."

"I'll wait," Gilson said. "And while we wait, you will please tell me some more."

Krantz assumed his lecturing voice again. "As to the nature of it, nothing. We have a window, which we believe to open into the past. We can see into it, so we know that light passes through; but it passes in only one direction, as evidenced by the fact that the people over there are wholly unaware of us. Nothing else goes through. You saw what happened to the rocks. We've shoved poles through the interface there — there's no resistance at all — but anything that goes through is gone, God knows where. Whatever you put through stays there. Your pole is cut off clean. Fascinating. But wherever it is, it's not where the house is. That interface isn't between us and the past; it's between us and — someplace else. I think our window here is just an incidental side-effect, a — a twisting of time that resulted from whatever tensions exist along that interface."

Gilson sighed. "Krantz," he said, "what am I going to tell the secretary? You've lucked into what may be the biggest thing that ever happened, and you've kept it bottled up for five days. We wouldn't know about it now if it weren't for the colonel's report. Five days wasted. Who knows how long this thing will last? The whole goddamn scientific establishment ought to be here — should have been from day one. This needs the whole works. At this point the place should be a beehive. And what do I find? You and a graduate student throwing rocks and poking with sticks. And a girlfriend looking up the dates of costumes. It's damn near criminal."

Krantz did not look abashed. "I thought you'd say that," he said. "But look at it this way. Like it or not, this thing wasn't produced by technology or science. It was pure psi. If we can reconstruct Culvergast's work, we may be able to find out what happened; we may be able to repeat the phenomenon. But I don't like what's going to happen after you've called in your experimenters, Gilson. They'll measure and test and conjecture and theorize, and never once will they accept for a moment the real basis of what's happened. The day they arrive, I'll be out. And damnit, Gilson, this is *mine*."

"Not any more," Gilson said. "It's too big."

"It's not as though we weren't doing some hard experiments of our own," Krantz said. "Reeves, tell him about your batting machine."

"Yes, *sir*," Reeves said. "You see, Mr. Gilson, what the professor said wasn't absolutely the whole truth, you know? Sometimes something *can* get through the window. We saw it on the first day. There was a temperature in-

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version over in the valley, and the stink from the chemical plant had been accumulating for about a week. It broke up that day, and the wind blew the gunk through the notch and right over here. A really rotten stench. We were watching our people over there, and all of a sudden they began to sniff and wrinkle their noses and make disgusted faces. We figured it had to be the chemical stink. We pushed a pole out right away, but the end just disappeared, as usual. The professor suggested that maybe there was a pulse, or something of the sort, in the interface, that it exists only intermittently. We cobbled up a gadget to test the idea. Come and have a look at it."

It was a horizontal flywheel with a paddle attached to its rim, like an extended cleat. As the wheel spun, the paddle swept around a table. There was a hopper hanging above, and at intervals something dropped from the hopper onto the table, where it was immediately banged by the paddle and sent flying. Gilson peered into the hopper and raised an interrogatory eyebrow. "Ice cubes," Reeves said. "Colored orange for visibility. That thing shoots an ice cube at the interface once a second. Somebody is always on duty with a stopwatch. We've established that every fifteen hours and twenty minutes the thing is open for five seconds. Five ice cubes go through and drop on the lawn in there. The rest of the time they just vanish at the interface."

"Ice cubes. Why ice cubes?"

"They melt and disappear. We can't be littering up the past with artifacts from our day. God knows what the effect might be. Then, too, they're cheap, and we're shooting a lot of them."

"Science," Gilson said heavily. "I can't wait to hear what they're going to say in Washington."

"Sneer all you like," Krantz said. "The house is there, the interface is there. We've by God turned up some kind of time travel. And Culvergast the screwball did it, not a physicist or an engineer."

"Now that you bring it up," Gilson said, "just what *was* your man Culvergast up to?"

"Good question. What he was doing was — well, not to put too fine a point upon it, he was trying to discover spells."

"Spells?"

"The kind you cast. Magic words. Don't look disgusted yet. It makes sense, in a way. We were funded to look into telekinesis — the manipulation of matter by the mind. It's obvious that telekinesis, if it could be applied with precision, would be a marvelous weapon. Culvergasts's hypothesis was that there are in fact people who perform feats of telekinesis, and although they never seem to know or be able to explain how they do it, they nevertheless perform a specific mental action that enables them to tap some source of energy that aparently exists all

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around us, and to some degree to focus and direct that energy. Culvergast proposed to discover the common factor in their mental processes.

"He ran a lot of putative telekinecists through here, and he reported that he had found a pattern, a sort of mnemonic device functioning at the very bottom of, or below, the verbal level. In one of his people he found it as a set of musical notes, in several as gibberish of various sorts, and in one, he said, as mathematics at the primary arithmetic level. He was feeding all this into the computer, trying to eliminate simple noise and the personal idiosyncrasies of the subjects, trying to lay bare the actual, effective essence. He then proposed to organize this essence into *words;* words that would so shape the mental currents of a speaker of standard American English that they would channel and manipulate the telekinetic power at the will of the speaker. Magic words, you might say. Spells.

"He was evidently further along than I suspected. I think he must have arrived at some words, tried them out, and made an attempt at telekinesis — some small thing, like causing an ashtray to rise off his desk and float in the air, perhaps. And it worked, but what he got wasn't a dainty little ashtray-lifting force; he had opened the gate wide, and some kind of terrible power came through. It's pure conjecture, of course, but it must have been something like that to have had an effect like *this.*"

Gilson had listened in silence. He said, "I won't say you're crazy, because I can see that house and I'm watching what's happening to those ice cubes. How it happened isn't my problem, anyhow. My problem is what I'll recommend to the secretary that we do with it now that we've got it. One thing's sure, Krantz: this isn't going to be your private playpen much longer."

There was a yelp of pure pain from Reeves. "They can't *do* that," he said. "This is ours, it's the professor's. Look at it, look at that house. Do you want a bunch of damn engineers messing around with *that?*"

Gilson could understand how Reeves felt. The house was drenched now with the light of a red sunset; it seemed to glow from within with a deep, rosy blush. But, Gilson reflected, the sunset wasn't really necessary; sentiment and the universal, unacknowledged yearning for a simpler, cleaner time would lend rosiness enough. He was quite aware that the surge of longing and nostalgia he felt was nostalgia for something he had never actually experienced, that the way of life the house epitomized for him was in fact his own creation, built from patches of novels and films; nonetheless he found himself hungry for that life, yearning for that time. It was a gentle and secure time, he thought, a time when the pace was unhurried and the air was clean; a time when there was grace and style, when young men in striped blazers and boater hats might pay decorous court

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to young ladies in long white dresses, whiling away the long drowsy afternoons of summer in peaceable conversations on shady porches. There would be jolly bicycle tours over shade-dappled roads that twisted among the hills to arrive at cool glens where swift little streams ran; there would be long sweet buggy rides behind somnolent patient horses under a great white moon, lover whispering urgently to lover while nightbirds sang. There would be excursions down the broad clean river, boats gentle on the current, floating toward the sound from across the water of a brass band playing at the landing.

Yes, thought Gilson, and there would probably be an old geezer with a trunkful of adjectives around somewhere, carrying on about how much better things had been a hundred years before. If he didn't watch himself he'd be helping Krantz and Reeves try to keep things hidden. Young Reeves — oddly, for someone his age — seemed to be hopelessly mired in this bogus nostalgia. His description of the family in the house had been simple doting. Oh, it was definitely time that the cold-eyed boys were called in. High time.

"They ought to be coming out any minute, now," Reeves was saying. "Wait till you see Martha."

"Martha," Gilson said.

"The little girl. She's a doll."

Gilson looked at him. Reeves reddened and said, "Well, I sort of gave them names. The children. Martha and Pete. And the dog's Alfie. They kind of look like those names, you know?" Gilson did not answer, and Reeves reddened further. "Well, you can see for yourself. Here they come."

A fine little family, as Reeves had said. After watching them for half an hour, Gilson was ready to concede that they were indeed most engaging, as perfect in their way as their house. They were just what it took to complete the picture, to make an authentic Victorian genre painting. Mama and Papa were good-looking and still in love, the children were healthy and merry and content with their world. Or so it seemed to him as he watched them in the darkening evening, imagining the comfortable, affectionate conversation of the parents as they sat on the porch swing, almost hearing the squeals of the children and the barking of the dog as they raced about the lawn. It was almost dark now; a mellow light of oil lamps glowed in the windows, and fireflies winked over the lawn. There was an arc of fire as the father tossed his cigar butt over the railing and rose to his feet. Then there followed a pretty little pantomime, as he called the children, who duly protested, were duly permitted a few more minutes, and then were firmly commanded. They moved reluctantly to the porch and were shooed inside, and the dog, having delayed to give a shrub a final wetting, came scrambling up to join them. The children and the dog

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entered the house, then the mother and father. The door closed, and there was only the soft light from the windows.

Reeves exhaled a long breath. "Isn't that something," he said. "That's the way to live, you know? If a person could just say to hell with all this crap we live in today and go back there and live like that.... And Martha, you saw Martha. An angel, right? Man, what I'd give to—"

Gilson interrupted him: "When does the next batch of ice cubes go through?"

"—be able to— Uh, yeah. Let's see. The last penetration was at 3:15, just before you got here. Next one will be at 6:35 in the morning, if the pattern holds. And it has, so far."

"I want to see that. But right now I've got to do some telephoning. Colonel!"

Gilson did not sleep that night, nor, apparently, did Krantz and Reeves. When he arrived at the clearing at five a.m. they were still there, unshaven and red-eyed, drinking coffee from thermos bottles. It was cloudy again, and the clearing was in total darkness except for a pale light from beyond the interface, where a sunny day was on the verge of breaking.

"Anything new?" Gilson said.

"I think that's my question," Krantz said. "What's going to happen?"

"Just about what you expected, I'm afraid. I think that by evening this place is going to be a real hive. And by tomorrow night you'll be lucky if you can find a place to stand. I imagine Bannon's been on the phone since I called him at midnight, rounding up the scientists. And they'll round up the technicians. Who'll bring their machines. And the army's going to beef up the security. How about some of that coffee?"

"Help yourself. You bring bad news, Gilson."

"Sorry," Gilson said, "but there it is."

"Goddam!" Reeves said loudly. "Oh, goddamn!" He seemed to be about to burst into tears. "That'll be the end for me, you know? They won't even let me in. A damn graduate student? In *psychology?* I won't get near the place. Oh, damn it to hell!" he glared at Gilson in rage and despair.

The sun had risen, bringing gray light to the clearing and brilliance to the house across the interface. There was no sound but the regular bang of the ice cube machine. The three men stared quietly at the house. Gilson drank his coffee.

"There's Martha," Reeves said. "Up there." A small face had appeared between the curtains of a second-floor window, and bright blue eyes were surveying the morning. "She does that every day," Reeves said. "Sits there and watches the birds and squirrels until I guess they call her for breakfast." They stood and watched the little girl,

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who was looking at something that lay beyond the scope of their window on her world, something that would have been to their rear had the worlds been the same. Gilson almost found himself turning around to see what it was that she stared at. Reeves apparently had the same impulse. "What's she looking at, do you think?" he said. "It's not necessarily forest, like now. I think this was logged out earlier. Maybe a meadow? Cattle or horses on it? Man, what I'd give to be there and see what it is."

Krantz looked at his watch and said, "We'd better go over there. Just a few minutes, now."

They moved to where the machine was monotonously batting ice cubes into the interface. A soldier with a stopwatch sat beside it, behind a table bearing a formidable chronometer and a sheaf of charts. He said, "Two minutes, Dr. Krantz."

Krantz said to Gilson, "Just keep your eye on the ice cubes. You can't miss it when it happens." Gilson watched the machine, mildly amused by the rhythm of its homely sounds: *plink* — a cube drops; *whuff* — the paddle sweeps around; *bang* — paddle strikes ice cube. And then a flat trajectory to the interface, where the small orange missile abruptly vanishes. A second later, another. Then another.

"Five seconds," the soldier called. "Four. Three. Two. One. *Now.*"

His timing was off by a second; the ice cube disappeared like its predecessors. But the next one continued its flight and dropped onto the lawn, where it lay glistening. It was really a fact, then, thought Gilson. Time travel for ice cubes.

Suddenly behind him there was an incomprehensible shout from Krantz and another from Reeves, and then a loud, clear, and anguished, "Reeves, *no!*" from Krantz. Gilson heard a thud of running feet and caught a flash of swift movement at the edge of his vision. He whirled in time to see Reeves' gangling figure hurtle past, plunge through the interface, and land sprawling on the lawn. Krantz said, violently, *"Fool!"* An ice cube shot through and landed near Reeves. The machine banged again; an ice cube flew out and vanished. The five seconds of accessibility were over.

Reeves raised his head and stared for a moment at the grass on which he lay. He shifted his gaze to the house. He rose slowly to his feet, wearing a bemused expression. A grin came slowly over his face, then, and the men watching from the other side could almost read his thoughts: Well, I'll be damned. I made it. I'm really here.

Krantz was babbling uncontrolably. "We're still here, Gilson, we're still here, we still exist, everything seems the same. Maybe he didn't change things much, maybe the future is fixed and he didn't change anything at all. I was afraid of this, of something like this. Ever since you came out here, he's been—"

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Gilson did not hear him. He was staring with shock and disbelief at the child in the window, trying to comprehend what he saw and did not believe he was seeing. Her behavior was wrong, it was very, very wrong. A man had materialized on her lawn, suddenly, out of thin air, on a sunny morning, and she had evinced no surprise or amazement or fear. Instead she had smiled — instantly, spontaneously, a smile that broadened and broadened until it seemed to split the lower half of her face, a smile that showed too many teeth, a smile fixed and incongruous and terrible below her bright blue eyes. Gilson felt his stomach knot; he realized that he was dreadfully afraid.

The face abruptly disappeared from the window; a few seconds later the front door flew open and the little girl rushed through the doorway, making for Reeves with furious speed, moving in a curious, scuttling run. When she was a few feet away, she leaped at him, with the agility and eye-dazzling quickness of a flea. Reeves' eyes had just begun to take on a puzzled look when the powerful little teeth tore out his throat.

She dropped away from him and sprang back. A geyser of bright blood erupted from the ragged hole in his neck. He looked at it in stupefaction for a long moment, then brought up his hands to cover the wound; the blood boiled through his fingers and ran down his forearms. He sank gently to his knees, staring at the little girl with wide astonishment. He rocked, shivered, and pitched forward on his face.

She watched with eyes as cold as a reptile's, the terrible smile still on her face. She was naked, and it seemed to Gilson that there was something wrong with her torso, as well as with her mouth. She turned and appeared to shout toward the house.

In a moment they all came rushing out, mother, father, little boy, and granny, all naked, all undergoing that hideous transformation of the mouth. Without pause or diminution of speed they scuttled to the body, crouched around it, and frenziedly tore off its clothes. Then, squatting on the lawn in the morning sunshine, the fine little family began horribly to feed.

Krantz's babbling had changed its tenor: "Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us...." The soldier with the stopwatch was noisily sick. Someone emptied a clip of a machine pistol into the interface, and the colonel cursed luridly. When Gilson could no longer bear to watch the grisly feast, he looked away and found himself staring at the dog, which sat happily on the porch, thumping its tail.

"By God, it just can't be!" Krantz burst out. "It would be in the histories, in the newspapers, if there'd been people like that here. My God, something like that couldn't be forgotten!"

"Oh, don't talk like a fool!" Gilson said angrily. "That's not the past. I

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don't know what it is, but it's not the past. Can't be. It's — I don't know — someplace else. Some other — dimension? Universe? One of those theories. Alternate worlds, worlds of If, probability worlds, whatever you call 'em. They're in the present time, all right, that filth over there. Culvergast's damn spell holed through to one of those parallels. Got to be something like that. And, my God, what the *hell* was its history to produce *those?* They're not human, Krantz, no way human, whatever they look like. 'Jolly bicycle tours.' How wrong can you be?"

It ended at last. The family lay on the grass with distended bellies, covered with blood and grease, their eyelids heavy in repletion. The two little ones fell asleep. The large male appeared to be deep in thought. After a time he rose, gathered up Reeves' clothes, and examined them carefully. Then he woke the small female and apparently questioned her at some length. She gestured, pointed, and pantomimed Reeves' headlong arrival. He stared thoughtfully at the place where Reeves had materialized, and for a moment it seemed to Gilson that the pitiless eyes were glaring directly into his. He turned, walked slowly and reflectively to the house, and went inside.

It was silent in the clearing except for the thump of the machine. Krantz began to weep, and the colonel to swear in a monotone. The soldiers seemed dazed. And we're all afraid, Gilson thought. Scared to death.

On the lawn they were enacting a grotesque parody of making things tidy after a picnic. The small ones had brought a basket and, under the meticulous supervision of the adult females, went about gathering up the debris of their feeding. One of them tossed a bone to the dog, and the timekeeper vomited again. When the lawn was once again immaculate, they carried off the basket to the rear, and the adults returned to the house. A moment later the male emerged, now dressed in a white linen suit. He carried a book.

"A Bible," said Krantz in amazement. "It's a Bible."

"Not a Bible," Gilson said. "There's no way those — things could have Bibles. Something else. Got to be."

It looked like a Bible; its binding was limp black leather, and when the male began to leaf through it, evidently in search of a particular passage, they could see that the paper was the thin, tough paper Bibles are printed on. He found his page and began, as it appeared to Gilson, to read aloud in a declamatory manner, mouthing the words.

"What the hell do you suppose he's up to?" Gilson said. He was still speaking when the window ceased to exist.

House and lawn and white-suited declaimer vanished. Gilson caught a swift glimpse of trees across a broad pit between him and the trees. Then he

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was knocked off his feet by a blast of wind, and the air was full of dust and flying trash and the wind's howl. The wind stopped, as suddenly as it had come, and there was a patter of falling small objects that had momentarily been wind-borne. The site of the house was entirely obscured by an eddying cloud of dust.

The dust settled slowly. Where the window had been there was a great hole in the ground, a perfectly square hole a hundred feet across and perhaps ten feet deep, its bottom as flat as a table. Gilson's glimpse of it before the wind had rushed in to fill the vacuum had shown the sides to be as smooth and straight as if sliced through cheese with a sharp knife; but now small-landslides were occurring all around the perimeter, as topsoil and gravel caved and slid to the bottom, and the edges were becoming ragged and irregular.

Gilson and Krantz slowly rose to their feet. "And that seems to be that," Gilson said. "It was here and now it's gone. But where's the prefab? Where's Culvergast?"

"God knows," Krantz said. He was not being irreverent. "But I think he's gone for good. And at least he's not where those things are."

"What are they, do you think?"

"As you said, certainly not human. Less human than a spider or an oyster. But, Gilson, the way they look and dress, that house—"

"If there's an infinite number of possible worlds, then every possible sort of world will exist."

Krantz looked doubtful. "Yes, well, perhaps. We don't know anything, do we?" He was silent for a moment. "Those things were pretty frightening, Gilson. It didn't take even a fraction of a second for her to react to Reeves. She knew instantly that he was alien, and she moved instantly to destroy him. And that's a baby one. I think maybe we can feel safer with the window gone."

"Amen to that. What do you think happened to it?"

"It's obvious, isn't it? They know how to *use* the energies Culvergast was blundering around with. The book — it has to be a book of spells. They must have a science of it — tried-and-true stuff, part of their received wisdom. That thing used the book like a routine everyday tool. After it got over the excitement of its big feed, it didn't need more than twenty minutes to figure out how Reeves got there, and what to do about it. It just got its book of spells, picked the one it needed (I'd like to see the index of that book) and said the words. Poof! Window gone and Culvergast stranded, God knows where."

"It's possible, I guess. Hell, maybe even likely. You're right, we don't really know a thing about all this."

Krantz suddenly looked frightened. "Gilson, what if — look. If it was that easy for him to cancel out the window, if he has that kind of control of telekin-

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etic power, what's to prevent him from getting a window on *us*? Maybe they're watching us now, the way we were watching them. They know we're here, now. What kind of ideas might they get? Maybe they need meat. Maybe they — my God."

"No," Gilson said. "Impossible. It was pure, blind chance that located the window in that world. Culvergast had no more idea what he was doing than a chimp at a computer console does. If the Possible-Worlds Theory is the explanation of this thing, then the world he hit is one of an infinite number. Even if the things over there do know how to make these windows, the odds are infinite against their finding us. That is to say, it's impossible."

"Yes, yes, of course," Krantz said, gratefully. "Of course. They could try forever and never find us. Even if they wanted to." He thought for a moment. "And I think they do want to. It was pure reflex, their destroying Reeves, as involuntary as a knee jerk, by the look of it. Now that they know we're here, they'll have to try to get at us; if I've sized them up right, it wouldn't be possible for them to do anything else."

Gilson remembered the eyes. "I wouldn't be a bit surprised," he said. "But now we both better—"

"Dr. Krantz!" someone screamed. *"Dr. Krantz!"* There was absolute terror in the voice.

The two men spun around. The soldier with the stopwatch was pointing with a trembling hand. As they looked, something white materialized in the air above the rim of the pit and sailed out and downward to land beside a similar object already lying on the ground. Another came; then another, and another. Five in all, scattered over an area perhaps a yard square.

"It's bones!" Krantz said. "Oh, my God, Gilson, it's bones!" His voice shuddered on the edge of hysteria. Gilson said, "Stop it, now. Stop it! Come on!" They ran to the spot. The soldier was already there, squatting, his face made strange by nausea and terror. "That one," he said, pointing. "That one there. That's the one they threw to the dog. You can see the teeth marks. Oh, Jesus. It's the one they threw to the dog."

They've already made a window, then, Gilson thought. They must know a lot about these matters, to have done it so quickly. And they're watching us now. But why the bones? To warn us off? Or just a test? But if a test, then still why the bones? Why not a pebble — or an ice cube? To gauge our reactions, perhaps. To see what we'll do.

And what *will* we do? How do we protect ourselves against *this*? If it is in the nature of these creatures to cooperate among themselves, the fine little family will no doubt lose no time in spreading the word over their whole world, so that one of these days we'll find that a million million of them have leaped simultaneously through such windows all over the earth, suddenly materializing like a cloud of huge, car-

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nivorous locusts, swarming in to feed with that insensate voracity of theirs until they have left the planet a desert of bones. Is there any protection against that?

Krantz had been thinking along the same track. He said, shakily, "We're in a spot, Gilson, but we've got one little thing on our side. We know when the damn thing opens up, we've got it timed exactly. Washington will have to go all out, warn the whole world, do it through the U.N. or something. We know right down to the second when the window can be penetrated. We set up a warning system, every community on earth blows a whistle or rings a bell when it's time. Bell rings, everybody grabs a weapon and stands ready. If the things haven't come in five seconds, bell rings again, and everybody goes about his business until time for the next opening. It could work, Gilson, but we've got to work fast. In fifteen hours and, uh, a couple of minutes it'll be open again."

Fifteen hours and a couple of minutes, Gilson thought, then five seconds of awful vulnerability, and then fifteen hours and twenty minutes of safety before terror arrives again. And so on for — how long? Presumably until the things come, which might be never (who knew how their minds worked?), or until Culvergast's accident could be duplicated, which, again, might be never. He questioned whether human beings could exist under those conditions without going mad; it was doubtful if the psyche could cohere when its sole foreseeable future was an interminable roller coaster down into long valleys of terror and suspense and thence violently up to brief peaks of relief. Will a mind continue to function when its only alternatives are ghastly death or unbearable tension endlessly protracted? Is there any way, Gilson asked himself, that the race can live with the knowledge that it has no assured future beyond the next fifteen hours and twenty minutes?

And then he saw, hopelessly and with despair, that it was not fifteen hours and twenty minutes, that it was not even one hour, that it was no time at all. The window was not, it seemed, intermittent. Materializing out of the air was a confusion of bones and rent clothing, a flurry of contemptuously flung garbage that clattered to the ground and lay there in an untidy heap, noisome and foreboding.

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Books

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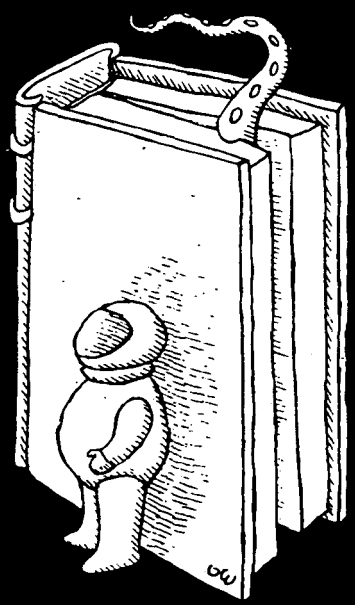

Lord Valentine's Castle, Robert Silverberg. Harper & Row, $12.50

The Empire of the East, Fred Saberhagen. Ace, $6.95 (Trade Paperback)

The Shadow of The Torturer, Gene Wolfe. Simon & Schuster, $10.95

Beyond the Blue Event Horizon, Frederik Pohl. Ballantine/del Rey, $9.95

The epic has become endemic in SF; sometimes it seems that hardly anyone writes anything less than a trilogy anymore.

Some of this reflects a general cultural demand. *Jaws* must have its *Jaws II*, *The Godfather* sprawled out, somewhere surely a production company is busy at work on *Doctor, Lawyer, Injun Chief*, and any day now Alex Haley is undoubtedly going to release a book called *Branches*. It's as if audiences, having found a good thing, are reluctant to believe that some other different thing in the future might also be good. They feel a little insecure with that thought ... they'd rather trust in the mixture as before.

Similar insecurities haunt the producers, both of audiovisual material and of book product. It has been found that there is an appetite for sequels, or for big, fat books which explicitly promise that if you like them at all, there'll be a lot to like before you exhaust the page-count.

And something like that is working on the creators. Mind you, there's nothing intrinsically meretricious in deciding to write a big, big, BIG story

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at a time when such things are popular. More, if Megabookery is a genuine reflection of a general cultural insecurity — which is what it was in the nineteenth century, and what it was when it led to endless sequelizations in the pulp magazines of the 1930s — then an artist, as part of the culture, responds naturally to such underlying imperatives.*

In other words, I'm pretty sure that most of today's sequels or trilogies or truly thick books are done by people whose aspirations rise above merely riding a trend. They're not folks who have discovered that the longer a book, the easier it is to plot.** Yes, *some* of the epics are actually psychosexual clichés; that's particularly true of sword-and-sorcery romances by young new writers. *Some* of the sequels are simply potboilers. But not the majority.

I go to these lengths of prefactory remark because as a general rule, almost all of this work betrays a certain uneveness. There are passages that seem wooden or perfunctory, as if the writer simply wanted to get through an obligatory scene in any way possible, so as to get to the richly imagined incident that can be seen waiting a little way farther down the skein of narrative. There are characters who have no depth or personality of their own; although they play fairly important parts, what they are is lay figures who serve to remind us of similar characters in other stories. There are ingenuities which are not actual pleasant surprises of intellectual prestidigitation; instead, they are places where a sequelist in great need of a narrative tool at a particular point has reached back into previous material, found something which at the time was usefully enigmatic, and now "explains" it in order to advance the present plot — thus warping the original nature of the story element, thus inevitably creating some degree of anticlimax, thus almost always robbing the sequel reader of some degree of his remembered pleasure in the original.

I think what such clumsiness reflects is usually neither haste nor crassness. I think it's the fact that few of the writers working in this form are accustomed to it; the trend came upon us so sharply and swiftly that most of the writers swept up in it went through their basic training at the time when it was received wisdom to believe that the novelette was the "natural" form of SF. We were all taught to do two things; keep it short, crisp, and economical, and then, for low-paying markets, use a lot of extra words—

I think I see Jung standing clear before me. That's a hell of a sight at this time of day.

**It's a fact. I would venture to say it takes no longer to produce a 150,000-word novel than it does to create a properly done 75,000-worder, simply because you can sail along in full confidence that the tangle of sub-plots and army of minor characters provide plenty of means with which to resolve any difficulties. In shorter work, your bag of tricks is skimpier, and you have to stop and think efficiently now and then.*

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short words—on top of the understructure.

That's poor training for the epic mode. The mode consumes a lot of words, but they want to be romantic, picture-painting words, rather than mere stuffing for the word-rate calculator. And it reacts badly to novelette plotting; sharp overturns of the situation are all well and good, but when they occupy one paragraph, as they do in novelettes, they ought not to be preceded by entire chapters of strung-out preparation, as they are in the epic mode.

All right. We've now had the short course on why, if you're anything like me, you've lately read a lot of books which are partly good, or which do not seem quite good in themselves but remind you of a good book, or which are good enough and no more than that. We also understand, I hope clearly, the future epics will very likely be better, as honest craftsmen gain skill in this new metier, and that there is always a lot of dross in every mode dross being something one can always safely ignore in assessing the *intrinsic* possibilities of a literary form.

The intrinsic possibilities of the epic form are in good, honest hands among the books we're looking at this time. If there are detail flaws on the order of those discussed above, they are not crucial. If there is not a genuine thundering all-time winner among them, there are certainly some which stand tall enough for present days. So in what follows, let's look mostly at what's good about them.

Lord Valentine's Castle is or should be quite familiar to you, as a recent four-part serial in this magazine. It's a significant book, as the first new Robert Silverberg novel in years and as the first genuine Silverberg epic, and is undoubtedly selling like hotcakes. Its literary merits for me center on the fact that I had a hard time putting it down long enough to get some sleep or get to any work of my own.

It is that magical thing, the page-turner...a story which, even when less than felicitously told on any given page, keeps you going because you know that on the next page you will be shown something fascinating.

It has going for it one of SF's most effective variants on the age-old effectiveness of the Little Tailor plot; an amnesiac hero who comes to realize that he was once a king, and might be king again. But what legitimizes it as a creation in itself is the world in which this story takes place — huge Majipoor, planet of vast distances, vast populations, and, most important, plenty of room for a wandering protagonist to encounter richly imagined outré situation after exotic situation.

I have never seen Silverberg deploy so much of his imagination in one place — which is not too surprising, considering the size of both of the place and of the text, but it is surprisingly

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well sustained, which couldn't have been all that easy over such a compass. There are places where he helps himself along with little in-group jokes; among the great lists of cities he mentions are Thagobar, Larnimisculus and Verf, a little bow to the days of Robert Randall. And there are places where I rather suspect he is borrowing incidents from mythologies obscure to western audiences rather than creating them whole. But the world of Majipoor is real; its people jostle and crowd in real streets, and real rain falls.

And there is of course the introduction of juggling, that very nice grace-note which humanizes the wandering Valentine, and does a great many other kinds of work in the narrative.

What comes through as a result of all this is a sense of Silverberg's witiness as well as of his intelligence: the book has charm, outweighing all other considerations. It operates on an intellectual plane of more than ordinary elevation, at the same time that it entertains, entertains, entertains.

Incidentally, I have not compared the serial version exhaustively to the text in the bound galleys Harper and Row sent me. But apparently Zalzan Gibor of the serial is Zalzan Kavol in the book. I can't imagine why the change;* at any rate he's still the same attractively grumpy four-armed juggler in both versions.

One of the book editors felt that Z.G. sounded too much like Zsa Zsa Gabor! The change was made in the book manuscript, but by that time it was too late for us to change the magazine version to conform. — ELF

Fred Saberhagen's *Empire of the East* shares with the Silverberg book in that both are science fantasy. For that matter, so is Gene Wolfe's *The Shadow of the Torturer.* In all three cases, the culture of the setting is founded on a lost high technology originating on Earth. Thus, Silverberg's beast-drawn caravans do not have wheels, floating on magnetic repulsors instead, and Saberhagen's peasant hero, Rolf, in his extremity of rebellion against a medieval, wizard-supported tyrant, discovers a long-hidden "elephant" which is actually a semiautomatic battle tank.

The mode comes quite attractively to Saberhagen's hands. Again I couldn't really put the book down and regretted every page turned because it made one page less to discover. I've always had a great deal of respect for Saberhagen as a writer, but I have never had him entertain me this effectively before.

Unlike the Silverberg, the Saberhagen was not conceived in one piece, and has no true unity beyond the fact that it has roughly the same characters and the same villain throughout its several distinct sub-sections, which once stood as independent novellas and have been revised into conformity with each other. It has another feature not as strongly present in the Silverberg; that is the character Chup who is

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a truly effective antagonist in one part, and who evolves into a hero in later chapters without particularly growing to like or sympathize with Rolf. This is a strong use of one of the most powerful capabilities of the epic mode — room enough to take a convincingly godlike perspective on its characters.

It also has a female villain of sufficient stature to match Chup. Charmain the bitch is the femme fatale closely and remorselessly observed; a major piece of characterization, done with a skill concealing both the art and the pain that must have gone into capturing her exactly. In that aspect, as in several of its others, *The Empire of The East* is the work of a master, and promises much.

Gene Wolfe is, I think, without peer at his own kind of story, and has a particular gift for the depiction of cataclysmic events through the eyes of a naive central character, usually an adolescent boy. In this case, he's Severian of the Torturers' Guild.

Not exactly a Little Tailor he. Rather, I suspect, a Man Who Learns Better, though we might have to wait out the remaining three volumes of this projected tetralogy to be sure of that. The narrative is done in the style of an old man, a potentate, inscribing an account of his passage through a convoluted life in a decadently subtle culture of enormous complexity.

The Matachin Tower of the torturers, like many of the adjoining strongholds of various other guilds, is in fact a long grounded starship, and the culture of Severian's world reflects occasional touches of contact with interstellar technology. But in the main it is a blend of medievalism underlain by references to an earlier Hellenistic view of life, which makes sense in terms of actual Terrestrial anthropology, and overlain by a Victorian prurience which differs sharply from the innocent bawdiness and casual violence of the Middle Ages but also makes a kind of sense given the proposed circumstances. The Torturers, once respected, are now utterly unfashionable; they are also, of course, indispensible, as are the plushy bordellos and the field of mortal trial by combat.

What I'm saying is that, with its references to DeSade, Plato and Jack the Ripper, this is a fully realized culture, utterly strange and utterly believeable, as might be expected from the author of "The Fifth Head of Cerberus."

Severian, considered as a character, is handicapped by the fact that we know we are meeting only one-fourth of him; considering that, he does better than well enough. The Chatelaine Thecla, his prisoner and first love, puts me in mind of certain ladies I have known, and somewhat of Blanche DuBois. Agia the trickstress and her desperate brother are very nicely done. It is Dorcas, the waif of the Botanic Gardens, who will explode into a major situation somewhere in subsequent volumes.

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The difficulty with taking full satisfaction with *The Shadow of the Torturer* is that one can't; some people write a series of four books and call it a tetralogy, but Wolfe is clearly writing one book with four aspects. Thus, while the whole will very likely be far greater than the sum of its parts, no one part is whole. It is also not dispensible.

Wolfe is asking a lot; he is asking us to read what will no doubt eventually be a quarter-million words while waiting for the full reward. But, you know, he's one of our very best. I think he deserves that much trust, because I think he'll repay it.

And then we come, at last, to Frederik Pohl's sequel to *Gateway*, which I strongly suspect is the middle volume in a trilogy even if Fred hasn't quite admitted it yet.

Beyond the Blue Event Horizon shares some of the flaws we talked about up front. Following a book of *Gateway's* excellence, when *Gateway* was not, I think, planned to have sequelae, is a doubly difficult task, forcing certain cards into the writer's hand.

Certain plays must be made; if you are going to talk about Robinette Broadhead at all after he becomes the tragic hero of the ultimate success story, you must talk about him from a different perspective now that he is established as the man who has everything attainable, within the special meanings of a situation in which he

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reached that status by rendering a major portion of his psychic life forever unresolvable.

Pohl handles this very skillfully, but there is no way he can restore the emotional effect of the reader's having spent an entire previous book groping with Broadhead toward an understanding of that situation. That is, the emotional experience that led to a demand for more of the same is the one emotional experience that no sequel can provide.

Then, there is the need for protagonists who do have immediate, genuine, but at least putatively resolvable problems. Pohl supplies these, in the crew members of a jackleg expedition to a supposed food factory left out beyond Pluto's orbit by the long-vanished Heechee race. And in the form of a waif who hasn't laid eyes on a human being in his conscious life.

All of these people are pretty well done, and their stories nicely told. But they are in close contact with Heechee technology. If they are to solve their problems, they must do so by, bit by bit, uncovering the answers to all those Heechee enigmas which made such an effective atmospheric background to the real story in *Gateway* And the real story in *Gateway* had little to do with half-understood alien starships, or prayer fans, or the exact psychology and appearance of the Heechee, and had everything to do with what went on in Broadhead's mind.

What is happening, in other words, is that the background has necessarily become the foreground; an adventure story has been built around the props and flats left lying around after *Gateway* had been brought to its conclusion When Broadhead is re-introduced as an active participant, he has no work to do; his actions are anticlimactic and don't actually further the plot in any way unique to him.

Now, as it happens, what results is a rather good adventure novel that does not do the slightest thing to change Broadhead's situation as of the ending of *Gateway*, but does substitute a grand concept, of vast scale and van Vogtian ambition, for an ending. Grand and, at the same time, thin, this cannot be the real ending of what has now become a saga in which Broadhead plays the central part but is presently encompassed by a much greater arena and a cast of other characters nearly as important as he.

So I rather think, yes, I rather think, that Fred will have to think further.

And I think something rather good and viable is coming out of all this adumbration and extraneity which, like Lord Valentine's castle of uncountable rooms, ambling and cascading down from the peak of the highest mountain, arouses both awe at its amorphology and wonder at its splendors.

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Here is a first-rate story about a child who is born sightless and develops the most astonishing method of dealing with the handicap. Richard Purtill was born in 1931, got his B.A., M.A. and Ph.D. from the University of Chicago. He has been teaching philosophy for seventeen years and started writing fiction several years ago. His fantasy novel, THE GOLDEN GRYPHON FEATHER, will be published soon by DAW.

Others' Eyes

BY

RICHARD PURTILL

I first discovered the fantastic truth about my nephew Bobby when he was about four months old. I had been out of the country when he was born: I do quite a bit of traveling in the business — or profession, if you like — that I'm in. I'm a consulting transportation engineer: If you want to move people or material from Place A to Place B, I'll tell you how to do it with the greatest cost-effectiveness and then hand you over to the specialists to implement my solution. Most, though not all of the problems I deal with come up in out of the way places, so I travel a lot. I missed my brother Bob's courtship and wedding as well as Bobby getting born, and I was sorry to miss both, but for rather different reasons.

Bob had married a girl — I'd call her a hippy, but I suppose that word is out of date now — who was "into" all the pseudo-scientific and antiscientific things that are floating around in our confused culture. She believed in astrology, of course, and talked to her plants, for openers, and went on from there to believe in "out-of-body experiences" and probably reincarnation, except she was a little dubious as to whether she could reconcile that with Christianity. She belonged to some kind of Christian sect, and of course she was ultra-liberal politically and an ecology nut. Because I started out as a highway engineer and do some work for DOD, she was just as suspicious of me as I was of her.

Still, she seemed to make Bob happy, and though I've been looking after Bob ever since our folks died when I was still in my teens, I try not to run his life for him. So Diane and I had arrived at a sort of truce: she knew Bob respected me and depended on me and she couldn't change that, and I knew

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that a mere brother couldn't and shouldn't come between man and wife. I was genuinely pleased when I heard that a child was on the way. When I decided that I liked roving better than being tied down in all aspects of my life, I had a vasectomy — one of the old, nonreversible kind — so even if some woman catches me in a weak moment and marries me, I won't produce any young Paul Winterfields. So Robert Winterfield, young Bobby, is as close to a son as I'm ever likely to get.

Bob talked about the baby all the way from the airport where he had picked me up, and I was really anxious to see him. Diane delayed me a little with small talk and a cup of tea sweetened with honey — coffee and sugar are both against some part of her patchwork belief system — but eventually I got to see my nephew. I was a little surprised that there was a fairly bright light over his crib, which Diane said they left on until she and Bob went to bed, in order to make it easier to check and make sure the baby was all right. Then she said something I discounted at the time, because it sounded so completely ridiculous.

"Actually to get him to go to sleep I usually have to shut my own eyes for a while," she said. She went on with some Diane-type explanation of how the baby was "attuned to her" or something like that. I thought it was just a good excuse for putting her feet up and taking a little rest after she'd settled the baby, but Bob startled me by saying that he had to do the same thing when he occasionally put the kid to bed.

Bobby was a cute little thing: even though I know intellectually that the cuteness of young animals is a survival trait that's been developed by natural selection, I'm a sucker for a kid or a puppy or a kitten. Hell, I've even seen young crocodiles in some of the jungles I've been in that were cute in a raffish sort of way. I congratulated Bob on a fine-looking kid and I suppose the unfamiliar voice woke the baby up. I got my first shock when he opened his eyes. It wasn't just that they didn't focus on things. I knew very little then about when babies begin to really see things. His eyes just looked wrong, somehow, dead, nonfunctional. I began to have a sick, cold, feeling that there was something wrong with my fine young nephew.

But just then he started to fuss, and Diane picked up one of those pacifier things they let babies suck on and asked in a soothing voice whether Bobby wanted his "pa." The kid reached right for it and took it out of her hand; he had to be able to see it to do that. But I still didn't like the look of those eyes. Diane shooed Bob and I out then, so she could put the baby back to sleep, and it gave me a funny feeling to see her rocking him in a rocking chair by the crib, her own eyes shut and the baby's eyes open and staring.

Bob took me up to my room — really mine, because wherever Bob and

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Diane moved, they rented a place with an extra room for me, which I used as a base whenever I was in the States. I payed them a good rent for it, and the result was that they had a nicer place than they could afford otherwise and had a paying guest who was hardly ever there. It was worth it to me; not only were the books and personal mementos I couldn't carry on my trips safe and well cared for, I also had a sense that there was someplace I call home, though I lived most of my life in fancy hotel rooms and primitive construction camps.

I unlocked a cupboard and gave Bob and myself a drink of good Scotch as I unpacked. His drinks with me are probably the only hard liquor Bob gets, which is just as well since Robert Winterfield the first, our old man, was a bit of a lush, and I don't want to see Bob go the same way. I tried to think of a tactful way of putting it, but I'm not much for tact; so after Bob and I had chatted a little about my last trip, I came out with it: "Bob, my nephew seems to be a fine healthy little kid, but his eyes look kind of funny. Has a doctor looked at them?" I knew the chances were that a doctor hadn't even seen the kid. Bob's letters had told me that the child was delivered by a midwife at home, and I knew from frustrating conversations with Diane that she was against most of modern practice. I suppose that if there was a common thread in Diane's various enthusiasms, it was being "natural": natural food, natural childbirth, "natural" medicine. So far as I could figure out, that meant that you could let a doctor set a broken leg or something like that, but x-rays, "chemical" medicines, and so on were out.

Bob confirmed my suspicions: Bobby had been given checkups by the midwife, mainly weighing, checking reflexes and that kind of thing, and had gone to the Public Health clinic for the usual shots — Bob had convinced Diane that innoculation merely stimulated the body's defenses and so was "natural." But no M.D. had given him a real going over. Bob had noticed the peculiarity of Bobby's eyes of course and had been worried by that, and by other things.

"He's just beginning to be able to express his wants of course," Bob said, "but all the time he's awake he seems to want someone paying attention to him. You can't just be in the same room with him; you have to look at him or at least look at something he's interested in looking at. Do that and he's a perfectly good baby. He'll play with his toys or look at television with you or look out the window with you at the birds or whatever. But if you look away from him and try to read a book or something, he complains. If he wakes up in his room he can't seem to amuse himself with toys or playing with his fingers like some babies; he wants Di or me to come and be with him. But it's not his eyes, or at least I don't think so: I've tried to test him

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and he sees as well as I do."

I think I was beginning even then to have some suspicion of the truth, but I bided my time and let Diane get used to having me around. Bob was at work during the day of course, and pretty soon there came a time when Diane wanted to go out and I was around the house. She asked me diffidently if I'd mind watching Bobby for a while, and concealing my eagerness, I said that I would. As soon as she was gone I went to work. I spotted various props to use and had some of them assembled in my room. I grabbed Bobby and a few of his favorite toys and took him up there. The tests I wanted to make were pretty clear in my mind, though some occurred to me as I went along.

All the details of those tests, and many I made afterwards, are written down in my records: I'll just give you some idea of how I went to work. For example, I took a bright-colored ball that Bobby was fond of and a good-sized plate of thin steel I'd dug up from some forgotten project. I held the steel plate right in front of Bobby's eyes and held the ball out to him; he took it from my hand unerringly. I held the plate between Bobby and me, with the ball on his side so I couldn't see the ball but I could see Bobby. I moved the ball around: he didn't have the slightest idea where it was, though I could tell since I could feel where my hand was. As soon as I brought the ball into my own field of vision, Bobby knew where it was.

There were lots of other tests, eliminating various unlikely hypotheses; in the years that followed I thought of a lot more unlikely hypotheses and eliminated them. But by the time my first series of tests were over, I was sure I had the right explanation: I'm just as sure now, though I can no longer test the theory. Bobby couldn't see a damn thing with his own strange-looking eyes. But he could see whatever I was looking at just as well — just *exactly* as well — as I could. Presumably he did the same thing with Bob and Diane. Whether he could do it with those who weren't blood relatives, we'd have to test. But basically Bobby couldn't see with his own eyes, and he could see with others' eyes.

I suppose you'd have to call it telepathy, but he didn't read my thoughts as such; when I knew by touch or sound where the ball was, this didn't get over to him; only when I saw it did he know. So far as you can tell with a baby that age, he didn't sense my thoughts or emotions. It was as if he spliced into the nervous system somewhere between the eyes and the brain. That's all he could do: see through my eyes, but he could do it. And of course it was scientifically impossible.

Luckily, I'm not a scientist, I'm an engineer. If I'm sure something works, I don't give a damn, basically, *why* it works. Also I've been reading science fiction since I was a kid: one of the best presents my dad ever gave me (one of the only presents come to that) was a

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copy of an old *Amazing Stories* he'd found on a streetcar. Jommy Cross in *Slan!*, Kimball Kinneson the Grey Lensman could read minds, see through others' eyes, why not Bobby? I hadn't expected to ever see something like that, but I hadn't expected to ever see men walking around on the Moon in my lifetime. But what I could see and test I could believe. Bobby read minds. Or eyes. Or, more likely, the part of the mind that received messages from the eyes.

I didn't say anything to Bob or Diane then, though I gave Bobby further tests as often as I got the chance. A consequence of this that I hadn't foreseen was that Bobby, who seemed to enjoy the tests, became very fond of me. Diane grew friendlier toward me as a result, and I knew that when I decided what was best to do I'd now have a better chance of persuading her as well as Bob. But I wasn't sure myself what was best to do.

Still, when I went off for a short trip to Canada, I was pretty sure that I ought to tell some responsible scientists about Bobby. I was pretty sure that J.B. Rhine was dead, but I believed that there was still some kind of research institute on parapsychology at Duke. I was toying with the idea of getting an introduction to somebody there through some of my academic contacts and sizing up the people involved in the research: I didn't want to let just anyone loose on Bobby.

The trip was to Alberta, Canada, in connection with the on-again, off-again development of the Athabascan oil sands. It was on at the moment, but the oil companies were afraid the conservation nuts would stop it again, and they didn't want to put a lot of money into access roads. So the question was how do you move a lot of very heavy stuff over rough terrain *without* building roads? The hovercraft equipment-movers I came up with as a solution to that problem were never used in Alberta, as it turned out, but I've used them in other places since.

But the trip landed me in a small town in northern Alberta with nothing to do one evening but watch television and no channel but the Canadian Broadcasting System. It happened that evening that there was a special about the Dionne quintuplets, how they were exploited, how the publicity ruined their lives and the lives of their parents. It was a powerful program, and the next day in Edmonton I bought the book it was based on, by a Canadian writer named Pierre Burton. The book finished the job the program had started. Five ordinary kids had been ground up by a great machine of government and business and show business, just because all five were born at one time. If anybody, no matter how well-intentioned, outside the family, got to know about Bobby's powers, the same thing would happen to him and to Bob and Diane.

Even aside from anything else, there was the national security angle.

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Think what a spy a grown-up Bobby would make: able to see through the eyes of anybody on the other side: There was no way any government that knew what he could do was going to let him grow up in any normal way. I'm a patriotic man, even a bit of a Cold Warrior. I don't trust the Russians or Chinese, and I think we ran out on our obligations in Southeast Asia. But I don't like spies, theirs *or* ours, I never have. I thought the American Way of Life could survive without Bobby as Superspy.

So it had to be secrecy. *Nobody* except Bob, Diane and I could know anything about Bobby's powers. I wasn't even all that hot about telling Diane, but I knew that there was no way to avoid it. As it happened, Diane was easier to convince than Bob was. She believed in enough crazy things already, and a blind baby who saw telepathically through other people's eyes fit in with some of her other odd beliefs, like out-of-body experiences. Actually, I thought, it probably went the other way: if people who were clinically dead but later revived were really able to see their own bodies from above and recount events that went on in the operating room while they seemed to be unconscious, it was very likely due to something like Bobby's wild talent. After doing some reading in parapsychology, I was willing to concede that many people may have latent "psi powers" which came out under crisis conditions. Bobby's crisis condition was being born blind and needing desperately to see.

Bob didn't want to believe in Bobby's telepathy because he didn't want to believe that the boy was blind: I suppose every father wants to deny that anything is wrong with *his* kid. But when I eventually convinced him he saw the point of keeping it secret: he could see what would happen to Bobby if the secret got out. The three of us kicked it around, but we couldn't see any way the kid could have a normal life without someone getting to know about his powers. How can you play hide and seek, for example, if you can see what the other kids see but can't see your own surroundings unless they do? How can you take a test in school if you can see other people's papers but not your own? There were just too many ways Bobby would be bound to give himself away if they tried to bring him up in an ordinary environment.

To my surprise it was Diane who came up with a workable solution. She knew of a little farming commune whose members put a high value on family togetherness and on privacy. They educated their own kids at home, using correspondence-course material designed for kids in isolated places: They'd fought a legal battle with the school system to win the right to do it. The kids spent a lot of time with their parents, helping out with chores and learning to take their place in the community. And even if they did find out about Bobby, or at least guessed there

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was something odd about him, Diane thought that they wouldn't press or probe, or tell outsiders what they saw or guessed.

I wasn't so sure about that, and I didn't like the fact that the group was some kind of religious sect, but aside from asking Bob and Diane to live like hermits, it was the only solution I could see to keeping Bobby's secret and at the same time giving him some kind of fairly normal life. Bob would have to become a part-time farmer, but he could use his training as an accountant too. The group was an offshoot of the Amish or Mennonites or one of those groups: irrational about some things but with a certain amount of hard Germanic good sense. They didn't use tractors or chemical sprays but they made their farming pay and they had no objections to double-entry bookkeeping. If fact Bob wound up spending more time with government forms than he did with a hoe or a horse-drawn plow.

I was getting to be a fairly wealthy man from my consulting business and had no one to spend it on but myself. I helped Bob and Diane over the transition and helped them buy into the commune, which was run a little like a condominium; each family owned their own home, subject to certain agreements, and a share in the farm enterprise. It was a sound business arrangement: my lawyer and my tax man assured me of that. My story for them, and for anyone else I had to explain things to, was that my hippy sister-in-law had talked my brother into a back-to-the-land movement and I was helping him get it out of his system. As time went on, mutual friends stopped asking when Bob would get over his craze: these days we're used to people doing funny things with their lives.

For Bobby it worked out well. Most of the day he spent with his mother, but as he got older he went out to work on the farm with his father. At the pace of nonmechanized farm life one person can act as the eyes of another. But of course someone always had to be looking where he needed to look: Bob or Diane had to "watch" for him while he dressed and washed himself or ate. They discovered fairly early on that he could see through anyone's eyes, only one person at the time though, and that person had to be fairly close to him at least to start.

The trigger for his "transferred sight," as I came to call it privately, was for someone to look at him. The sight of his own face or body in some way locked him into that person's eyes until the person went too far away or shut their own eyes. When Bob wanted to take over "watching" for him from Diane, she would shut her own eyes and Bob would look at Bobby. He never seemed to have much trouble adjusting to the new viewpoint, which surprised me until I thought of how easily we accept sudden changes of

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point of view in the movies or on 3V. And Bobby, of course, had never learned to coordinate his point of viewing with his physical position.

On the farm with plenty of animals around they soon learned that Bobby could see through the eyes of animals too, and after that they got him a dog of his own. That solved some problems, because with Ranger at his heels Bobby could move around the farm without other people to see for him. But even the best trained dog won't always look where you want him to look, and a dog doesn't look at things the way a person does. After Bobby got old enough we had some interesting conversations about things like that: I suppose I know things about the way animals see that experimental psychologists would give their eyeteeth to know.

I don't know if they're still arguing about whether animals see colors: according to Bobby they do, but they don't pay any attention to them. And even after Bobby learned to read he could never read anything through the eyes of an animal: their eyes don't focus on letters, don't *attend* to them. So Bobby, just with Ranger for company, couldn't really cope with all the things that a kid his age should have been able to cope with. But having Ranger as an alternate "watcher," even an inadequate one, took some strain off Bob and Diane.

It was a strain, no question about it. If Bobby had just been blind, he could have adjusted to it, learned to move cautiously, to read Braille, all the tricks a visually handicapped person learns to survive in the world. But Bobby would be "seeing" as well as anyone else one minute, and then his "watcher" would look away, glance down at a book, or shut his eyes, and suddenly Bobby was visually disoriented. It was hard enough for Bob and Diane to remember that: it always took me a while to get used to it again on my visits. If he was depending on the eyes of a person who wasn't deliberately "watching" for him, Bobby could be suddenly struck with what amounted to intermittent blindness. If you're running down a road or chopping wood and your "eyes" look away suddenly, you can hurt yourself badly.

Bobby learned to "coast past" transitions like this, after a fashion, but there was a limit to what he could do. Try going about your normal activities, shutting your eyes at irregular intervals and keeping them shut for even, say, thirty seconds. Sometimes it wouldn't make a bit of difference, other times it could be disastrous. In a city with traffic, with modern machinery all around, Bobby probably wouldn't have lived to grow up. Even on the farm, even with Bob and Diane "watching" for him, Bobby had some accidents and some close calls. But he did grow up.

I visited him whenever I could, even though it was less convenient at first, making my headquarters in the

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States on the farm rather than in a city. Actually I had to rent space in a nearby town and install, first, communications equipment and, then, computers; the people in the commune didn't want that kind of equipment on their land, and I couldn't function without it. There was one telephone on the whole farm, an old wire job, not an L-line, and it was in their business office. So when I was in the States I spent my working day at my office in the town and lived at the farm.

I tried not to break any of their rules, because I thought sometime we might depend on their good will. I even tried once in a while to give them advice on making their operation more efficient. Sometimes my solutions were too technological for them, but gradually I learned to work within the limitations they set on themselves; after all, an engineer is always working within the limits of the possible, whether the possibilities are natural or artificial (budgetary for instance). I even came to value my visits to the farm as a change of pace from the increasingly technological society outside, though I was never convinced that they weren't crazy to throw away what technology could do for them. After a few tentative attempts the people I met in the commune knew better than to talk religion to me. So they refrained from preaching to me and I restrained myself from trying to talk sense to them.

It was too good to last, or course, and there's a bitter kind of satisfaction in the thought that it was my own actions that brought it all to an end, not betrayal from the commune or probing from the outside. I was always trying to keep Bobby, and Bob for that matter, from being too shut in by the peculiarities of the group they lived in. I got a fairly expensive 3V for my office, for instance, when a chance remark made me realize that the last television Bob had seen was the old flat kind and Bobby had never seen any kind of broadcast entertainment. (Of course by then movies were all being broadcast from Burbank or New York).

I could never get them to go with me to the city and perhaps it was just as well; even aside from Bobby, Bob and Diane would have had quite an adjustment to make after sixteen years on the farm; street ads hadn't been controlled yet. But anything "natural" was still "good" to Diane, and eventually I discovered she'd always wanted to see the Grand Canyon. I worked on her quietly and finally she agreed to a family vacation on the North Rim, which had been kept pretty primitive. She didn't like the ATV I rented for the trip, a hovercamper with lots of gadgets, but I convinced her it would let us keep our contacts with the outside world to a minimum. She had the last laugh though: she dug up some old nylon camping tents from someone in the commune, and when we got to the North Rim I found I had to park at ATV in a storage area and help carry

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the tents and other primitive "camping equipment" to a campground some distance away.

I wasn't doing so well introducing Bobby and Bob to the delights of civilization, which had been one object of the trip, but at least I had got them off the farm for a while, which was part of my plan. Now that Bobby was old enough to conceal his gifts, I had no intention of leaving him buried in the Middle Ages, which was what life at the farm amounted to. I relaxed and enjoyed Diane's cooking, which was always good, helped "watch" for Bobby and took family hikes along the rim of the Canyon. It was on one of these hikes that the beginning of the end came.

The South Rim is pretty well patrolled and civilized now, but on the North Rim there are still little trails going down the wall of the canyon for a way: almost all of them peter out after a while, but people still go down them, and the Park Service doesn't have enough people to stop them or close off all the trails. We knew better than to try them, especially with Bobby in tow, but one evening when we were hiking past a trail head, we heard a feeble call for help and a rattle of loose stones. I was just grumbling about the necessity of going and getting help for the idiot when I saw Bob stripping off his day pack and preparing to go down the trail.

"He might not last until we get help, Paul," Bob said with a determination he rarely showed, at least to me. "I'll be careful, but I've got to go see the situation he's in." I started arguing, but he was already down the trail. I started after him but the trail narrowed and I was fool enough to look down. I clung to the wall, sick and dizzy. Acrophobia is one weakness I've never been able to overcome, and somehow it makes it more humiliating that it's a weakness I share with Diane; she can't stand heights any better than I can. She couldn't control her own fear well enough to come and help me or bring Bobby to help me: I had to wait until Bob came back up the trail from his reconnaissance, face his sympathy and submit to having him help me up the trail.

I sat down on the ground, still sick and dizzy, and somehow before I knew it Bob had taken over. He sent Diane for help but he told us that the ledge was crumbling and the man had to at least be dragged back onto the firmer part of the trail and it would need two men to do it. "It's our Christian duty," he told Bobby, matter-of-factly, and even with everything else happening it made me feel sicker to realize how deeply the values of the farm community had sunk into them.

I forced myself to speak. "It's his own damn fault," I said. "You don't owe him a damn thing. Stay here until...." It was too late, they were gone down the trail. I got to my feet and then decided that was a bad idea: I crawled as close as I dared to the trail

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head. I kept telling myself there was no danger, I had to control myself, but you can't argue with your gut. Just before it happened, I was worrying more about whether Bobby would lose respect for me than I was about the actual danger. Surely Bob wouldn't put Bobby at any real risk for a total stranger, Bobby with his unique powers.

Then there was a horrible sliding and grinding sound. My heart stopped and then started racing and I even got a few feet down the trail before my weakness immobilized me again. "Bobby," I yelled. "Bobby, are you all right?" I breathed again as his voice came from not too far away.

"I'm here, Uncle Paul. The ledge gave way. I think the man is dead. I grabbed Dad and he didn't go over, but he hit his head. I'm here with him and I'm not sure how safe the ledge is where we are. I don't dare move." He paused and I could hear him draw a breath and try to steady his voice. "Uncle Paul, there's nobody to watch for me. I can't see." The disaster we'd avoided for sixteen years came as simply as that.

"All right, Bobby," I said, trying to keep my voice confident. "I'm going to go along the edge and try to look down on you from above. If I can't do that I'll come down that path if I have to crawl on my belly. I probably won't be able to help you much, but I can watch for you." From his voice, Bobby wasn't much reassured. "There's an overhang above us Uncle Paul: Dad looked up when we were coming out here. And there's one very narrow place right round the bend from you: the only way to get around it is to hug the rock and move your feet one at a time." He didn't need to say it: I just couldn't make myself negotiate a place like that.

I refused to accept that. There was still the noise of a rock falling now and then, and I didn't dare wait for help. "All right, I'll have to come that way, Bobby. Hold on." His voice came back, quick and alarmed. "No, Uncle Paul, nobody without a good head for heights could get around that narrow piece. Wait for a minute and don't talk, please." The silence lengthened out, punctuated by an occasional falling rock.

"What are you doing?" I called at last. Bobby had the grace to sound a little embarrassed. "Praying, Uncle Paul." I almost lost my temper and shouted at him. While I was still fighting for control, his voice came again, calm now and under control. "Don't worry, Uncle Paul. Nothing can happen that ... oh ... it's so beautiful...." His voice had changed completely on the last words, and I wondered if he'd cracked under the strain. Or maybe ... my heart bounded ... maybe someone had him under observation, perhaps with field glasses. Could Bobby's talent bridge a distance like that? "Bobby, can you see?" I shouted.

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His voice still had that strange enthralled note that had made me doubt his sanity. "Yes, Uncle Paul, I can see really ... wonderfully. Wait a minute while I get Dad back from the edge. Then I'll be up." There were dragging sounds and then light, confident steps. Bobby came into my view: he was smiling but his face was pale, his freckles standing out like print on a page. Once more I suffered the humiliation of being led up the path like a child. When Bobby faced me on the main trail and said simply, "My prayers were answered," something snapped inside me. I swear I just meant to slap his face to snap him out of whatever state he was in, but somehow my hand became a fist. He fell at my feet and I gathered him in my arms. "Bobby, I'm sorry, I'm sorry," I said, but he was unconscious. I was still there cradling him in my arms when the blessed sound of machinery came up the path and a Park Service vehicle screeched to a halt beside me.

The Park Service has some pretty sophisiticated equipment for emergencies now: they got Bob up in two shakes and the body of the fool who started it all up in not much longer; then they coptered us all over to the new hospital on the South Rim. Bobby and Bob were whisked off for examination, and Diane and I were stuck in a waiting room. Later they came for Diane and I was left to pace alone.

I was getting madder and madder: the one thing that distinguishes M.D.s from other technicians is their high-handed attitude toward their clients. I was about to sally out of the waiting room and tear the place apart until they gave me some information, when finally a man in a sickly green disposable surgeon's outfit came into the room. Incongruously he had on hiking boots, covered by transparent booties.

"Mr. Paul Winterfield?" he asked brusquely. "Your sister-in-law thought I'd better fill you in on what's happening. Your nephew is a very fortunate young man." I gaped at him. "Bobby? But he wasn't ... I didn't...." He gave me a professional sort of smile. "No reason for you to know, but I'm an eye man, one of the best in the Bay Area, if I say so myself. Your nephew was born blind, wasn't he? Bad condition too, nothing we could have done about it, even as late as last year. But the pericorneal transplant is almost a standard procedure now: I've done dozens. And the man your brother and nephew tried to save had an organ donor's card. Poetic justice. The operation's all done in fact. Your brother's fine too; just a crack on the head. But your nephew, as I said, is a lucky boy, me being here on vacation, the staff here knowing me, the body definitely dead but fresh as a daisy. Couldn't have worked out better."

I stopped gaping and thanked him profusely, letting him know tactfully that his fees would be taken care of promptly and in full. You could tell he hadn't worried about that, though: the

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really good people in any line always care more about the job than the pay. Since they wouldn't let me see either Bobby or Bob, I checked into a motel near the hospital, but I got very little sleep that night. I was trying to figure out what I'd say to Bobby when I saw him again.

I saw Bob before I saw Bobby, and he was a little annoyed because I'd forgotten about Diane the night before, but we were too excited about Bobby's operation to talk about much else. I camped in the waiting room then, and by bugging the nurses politely got in to see Bobby as soon as they were allowing visitors. I meant to start out with apologies for hitting him, but I was too surprised at the sight of him. Some memory of old movies had led me to expect to find him swathed in bandages, with a grand unwrapping still some time away: I'd forgotten modern quick-heal medicine. For the first time since I'd first seen him as a baby, Bobby's eyes were alive and functional. He looked at me and saw me with his own eyes.

He grinned a little shyly and said, "Yeah, I can see, Uncle Paul." Then he looked around the room: he hadn't quite got the hang of doing it by moving his eyes yet, and he moved his whole head in a way that looked a little unnatural. He spoke again in a lower voice. "I can see with my own eyes. And that's all." he didn't need to say any more; I had been half afraid of this. His strange talent had been called forth by his blindness; now that he could see with his own eyes, it had gone, along with the need that had brought it out. But I wondered whether the trauma of being hit by someone he'd always trusted had anything to do with it.

"Bobby when did you ... lose it?" I asked cautiously. "Were you unconscious until after the operation, or...." He shook his head. "Oh, no, I wasn't out long, Uncle Paul. I heard Dr. Morrow discussing what he wanted to do with Mom, and I told her I wanted him to try. But I haven't been able to see ... the old way ... since I came off the path. When I was talking to you just before I fell or passed out or whatever it was, I was already blind again."

He either didn't know, then, or had suppressed the knowledge that I had hit him. Like a coward, I didn't tell him. Instead I asked, "What happened on the path? Was there an animal, or someone observing you from a distance, or what? How did you see?" His face got the same space-out look as it had just before I had hit him, as he said, "Oh, no, Uncle Paul. Not an animal, and not a person — a human person, that is. You know I told you that you can tell lot about a person by the way he looks, like Pete Jones and the way he looked at girls? Whatever came when I prayed ... well, it was looking over my shoulder, looking just where I needed to see. And the way things looked ... everything was beautiful, everything looked important

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and valuable, even the pebbles and the thorns on the cactus. Uncle Paul..." his voice dropped, "...I think it must have been an angel."

I didn't take that very well. In fact it was my day for not taking things well. Eventually the nurse came in and told me I was disturbing the patient and I had to leave. All right, maybe I was shouting a little. And it wasn't too smart, maybe, to storm off to Bob and ask him when they were leaving that cockeyed commune, now that Bobby's eyes were OK. I didn't like it when he told me that they were at home there and had no intention of leaving: soon I was asked to leave another room.

I guess in my annoyance at their muddle-headedness I said some pretty cutting things. Telepathy I'll buy, but when someone starts talking about angels, when a man who's been reasonably educated starts quoting the Bible at you, well, I just lose my patience. Whether or not we can explain how it's propagated, telepathy is a physical event. But when you start bringing in nonmaterial beings and talking about God, you're clear outside reasonable argument, so far as I'm concerned.

I suppose eventually we'll all cool down and I can pick up my relationship with my brother and nephew on some basis. But at the time it seemed wisest to check in with the office and turn an urgent request into an emergency that required me to go off on another trip. Some people might have thought it funny that it was Diane I could say good-by to, but aside from surface politeness we'd never kidded each other: we were enemies fighting for what I guess she'd call the souls of Bobby and Bob.

"I'm sorry you quarreled with them," she said. Hell, she could afford to be generous: for now at least she'd won. "They always had hopes that you'd come around, but I didn't think you would. They're both still fond of you Paul, and we all appreciate all you've done for us. Maybe you'd have become less interested in Bobby anyway, now that he's not a problem anymore. You're really more interested in problems than in people, Paul."

She was right in a way, of course, though the slant she put on it was wrong: I am a problem man, not a people man. But I had gotten more than a fascinating problem in Bobby. He was still the closest thing to a son I'd ever have; that's why it hurt so much when he rejected my values. And there had been something, I don't know, an openess to new possibilities in the years Bobby had been in my life, that kept things from getting stale. Who knows what his "angel" had been really. An alien in an invisible space vehicle? A very earthly mosquito whose sensory input had been strange enough to cause the curious effect Bobby had reported? We'd never know.

And I'd never know, either, what I'd seemed to almost touch in my association with Bobby — what it's really like to see through others' eyes.

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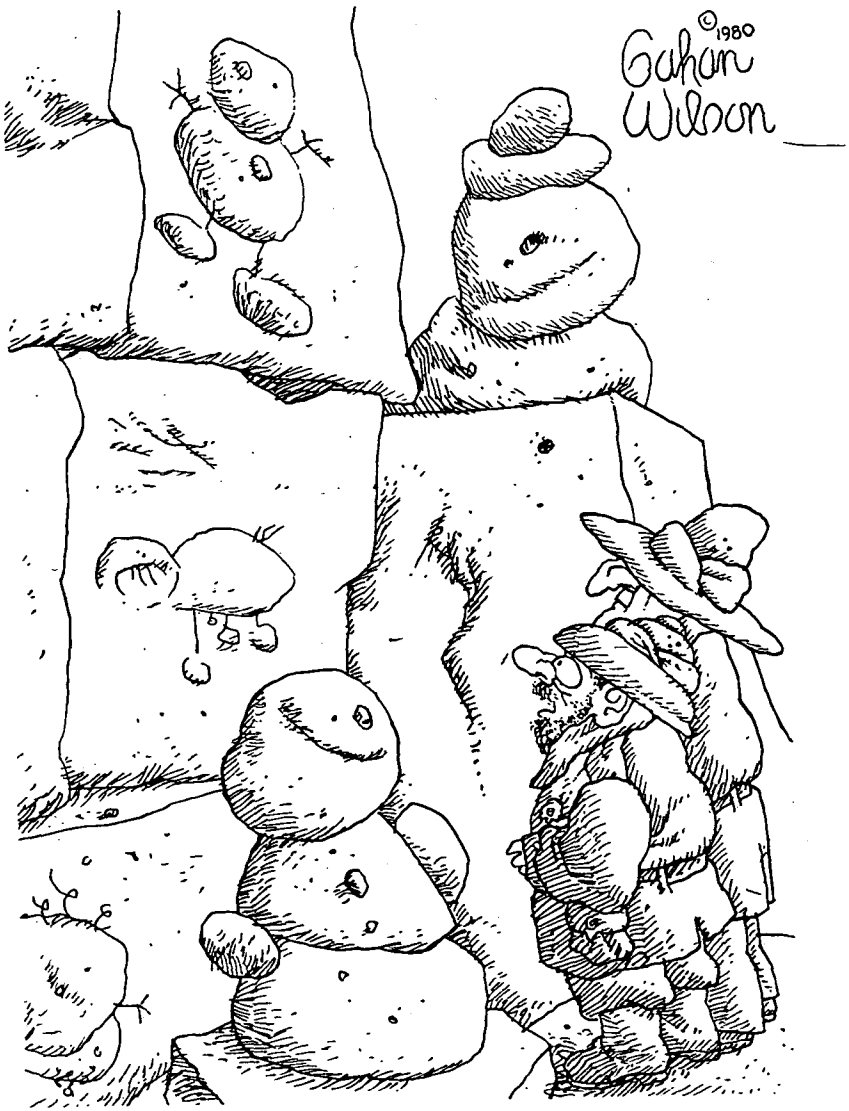

"I don't know, Professor, this civilization is so primitive it hardly seems worth our time!"

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This strong story about — of all things — an attendant in a comfort station, is a sequel to "The Lordly Ones," March 1980.

The Comfort Station

BY
KEITH ROBERTS

She came over the skyline cautiously, ducking among the low gorse clumps that dotted the hillside. Between the spiny bushes with their bright haze of flowers were outcrops of rocks, orange-patched with lichen. She dropped prone by the tallest of them, wriggled forward to lie staring down, her chin on her wrist.

Below her, some fifty meters away, ran a narrow metalled road. By it the first of the stones stood like sentinels in a bleached sea of grass. The lines stretched into the distance, ragged and broken. Beyond, the plain ran to a blue horizon. Closer at hand a copse thrust out an arm toward the road. Where road and trees met stood a foursquare little building of fawn-colored brick. Beside it was a metalled parking area, empty of cars.

The girl ran her tongue across her lips and studied the building. It was flat roofed; it possessed two little skylights, and round the walls were narrow windows of muffled glass. Two doors, both open, faced the road. Beside each, fixed to the wall, was a square white plaque. Each had a black doll-symbol on it; a man, and a woman. A breeze stirred the branches of the trees. Nothing else moved, and the afternoon was silent.

She wiped her forehead with her arm. She stared behind her, then back down. Her eyes were large and wide-set, of a color between green and brown. Her face was broad across cheekbones and jaw, her skin tanned to a clear light olive. Her hair was dark. A strand blew across her mouth and she put it back without removing her gaze.

She waited some time by the rocks. Finally she rose. She stared behind her once more and started down the hill-

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side, hobbling painfully. She wore a faded khaki shirt and light belted slacks, grass-stained about the knees. The shirt was marked with sweat, between the shoulder blades and under the arms. A canteen bumped at her hip; on her back, held by a broad sling, was a sub-machine gun.

At the road she paused again, staring right and left before limping across. She flattened herself against the wall of the little building. She took the gun from her shoulder, eased through the nearer of the doors. Inside she straightened slowly, staring once more, at the line of cubicles with their blue-painted woodwork, the spotless sinks, the towel unit showing a loop of crisp white linen. The brick walls were painted a cool grey, and at the rear of the place was another door, also blue. She edged forward, touched the catch. It opened. Beyond was a narrow room, likewise unoccupied. She saw a tall cupboard, a rack of slatted pine shelving. The uppermost shelf held spare rolls of towel; everywhere else, on the floor, piled on the shelving, were cans of beans and spaghetti, corned beef and stewed steak. She opened the cupboard. It was full as well. She said, "Jesus Christ."

Outside again, the sun struck hot. She leaned on the wall for a moment, holding one foot away from the ground; then she repeated the exploration. The men's side was empty too, smelling of disinfectant. The little windows were propped open on stout brass stays; the urinal gleamed whitely, the copper pipes above it polished to a salmon pink. About the place was the hiss and tinkle of water.

At the back an identical door led to a second storeroom. There were more shelves, also piled with provisions; a chair and folding table, saucepans, a twin-ring camping stove, a sink. The window was open; she craned, saw the nearest of the trees. Beyond them the stones shimmered in sunlight.

In one corner of the little room was a camp bed heaped with blankets. She laid the gun down and sat on the edge of the bed, gripping her ankle. She swung her legs up, lay back and closed her eyes. It was her intention to doze, rest a few minutes before moving on; but a deeper sleep claimed her.

Her waking was instantaneous. She jerked erect, scooping up the gun in the same movement, sat glaring at the man who stood in front of her.

He was short and balding. He wore an old check shirt, the sleeves rolled to the elbows, and a pair of baggy corduroys. On his feet were boots with brightly polished toecaps. His fringe of hair was browny-grey; and he wore horn-rimmed spectacles through which he blinked, eyes sidling away and back. One hand was still on the catch of the door; in his other he held a bulging carrier bag.

She lowered the gun, slowly. She said, "You must be the attendant."

He didn't answer, and after a while she said, "What's in the bag?"

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He shuffled forward a little, back hunched. He gripped the bag, protectively, and she repeated the question. He started at that, eyes flickering. He dropped the thing on the table, with a quick little movement. Some of its contents spilled, and she laughed. "Mushrooms," she said. "I expect the woods are full of them."

She swung her legs from the bed. "You gave me a scare," she said. "What's your name?"

No answer. She stared, curiously. She said, "You can talk, can't you? Do you understand what I'm saying?"

He opened his mouth, as if to answer, but no sound came out. A tic developed in his cheek, and she shrugged. "Forget it," she said. "It doesn't matter. Have you got any cigarettes? Cigarillos?"

He stood puzzling, as if coming to a momentous decision; then he shuffled across the room, still with his eyes on the bunk. He took down a carton, opened it and laid a pack of cigarettes on the end of the bed. She grabbed for it, disbelieving, and he jumped back.

"It's all right," she said. "I shan't eat you." She opened the pack, hands shaking a little. She produced a lighter, flicked it. She inhaled, and blew smoke gratefully. She said, "Thanks...."

She laid the pack down. "Did you see anybody in the woods? Any soldiers?"

He shook his head, frowning. She watched him for a moment with her brilliant eyes. "I'm Anna," she said. "Not that it matters." She paused. "There were twelve of us," she said. "They jumped us, early on. At first light. I got away with a twisted ankle. The rest...." She stared, at nothing. "You're sure there wasn't anybody?"

He still stood, it seemed undecided; and she lay back on the bed. She said, "God, I could use a drink."

He didn't react immediately; just glanced under his brows, at her, at his hands, at the mushrooms scattered on the table. Finally he turned to the sink. He filled a kettle, set it on the little stove. He produced a box of matches and lit the gas, placing the spent match carefully in a round tin lid. She said, "This is crazy." She pushed her hair back. "You lost your electricity," she said. "But you've still got water. That I can understand. There's nobody else to use it."

When the kettle boiled he took down a teapot. He warmed it, spooned in tea and stirred. He produced two bright, thick beakers, filled them and placed one on the table with a bag of sugar. Then he stepped back.

"Okay," she said. "It's all right." She got up, limped to the table, took the beaker and returned to the bed. "I expect you're wondering about me," she said. "I'm the last thing you expected to see. Well, I'm wondering about you too. You been here all the time?"

No answer.

"Do you *know* what happened?" she said. "To the town? Or

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did you just think it was some sort of fancy firework show?"

Nothing.

She nodded. "You knew," she said. "That's why you stocked up. Where'd you get it? Village near here, is there? With a shop?" She looked round her. "Must've taken you a month," she said. "Hauling it all back. You've been real busy, haven't you? Why'd you do it? To stop yourself thinking? Or wasn't that ever a problem?"

She drank the tea, slowly, and set the mug down. She said, "That was good." She glanced at him. "Have you got a bowl? I want a bowl of cold water."

When he did decide to move, it was always suddenly. Like a bird. Or a lizard. He scrabbled in the locker beneath the sink, straightened up with a yellow plastic bowl. He filled it and turned to her, looking troubled.

"Over here," she said. "Put it on the floor."

He did as he was told, and scuttled away again.

"You're not a deaf-mute," she said thoughtfully. "You're just scared. What of? I'm not going to hurt you." She bent to unlace her boot. She pulled her sock off, wincing, inspected her ankle. It was puffy and inflamed. She rolled her trouser leg to the calf, lowered her foot carefully into the water and began to bathe it. "I planned on moving out by nightfall," she said. "But I'm not going to get much farther on this. So it looks as if you're stuck with a nonpaying guest."

The other glanced at her shyly, and back to the table. Then it seemed he once more reached a decision. He took down a saucepan and began peeling the mushrooms, carefully, inspecting each one before dropping it in. "That's fine," she said. "You just carry on with the housework. Don't mind me."

She lit another cigarette. She said curiously, "*Did* you get out? When it started? Or was this your job all along?"

The other set the pan on the gas ring and turned the flame low. He added oil from a plastic bottle, and a plopping and crackling began inside.

"All along," said the girl. "That's my bet anyway. And you just stayed put. You reckoned it was the safest place. You fetched the stove and the food and the bed. So you could sit it out. It was easy, there was nobody left to stop you. Or maybe you didn't reckon anything. You just couldn't think what else to do."

The other unzipped a tin, added its contents to the pan. The sizzling redoubled, and the girl put her head on one side. "You been a Shithouse Dan all your life?" she said. "Or did you come down in the world?" She showed her teeth. "Maybe it was what you wanted," she said. "A nice little number. Your own boss, and nothing to think about. And what the hell's wrong with that?" She looked thoughtful. "I wonder how you got the job," she said. "Somebody know some-

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body? Or was there an advertisement? Who'd you have to write to? The council? Or the museum?" She shook her head. "It's things like that I always want to know. The little things. You can't ever know enough. Not if you live a million years." She stubbed the cigarette. "Sounds crazy, doesn't it?" she said. "Living a million years. But you know what Alex used to say? There's nothing to it. A million people do it, every twelve months." She moved her foot, carefully, and winced again. "They killed him this morning," she said. "Got him through the legs. They didn't waste any more bullets though. And it wasn't quick either." She swallowed. "I had to watch," she said. "I was up among the rocks. I couldn't get away because of my ankle."

The attendant set out two plates and turned off the gas. The girl watched him, broodingly. "All for you," she said. "Do you know that? That's why he died. That's why they all died. So we could give back what they took from you. Only we were wasting our time. We can't give back what you've never had." She smiled, lopsidedly. "It doesn't make any difference to you," she said. "You've always been here, haven't you? Like the stones. You always will be. You're *Homo sapiens.* With your head in a bog and a flute stuck up your arse."

The other turned to her, blinking.

"All right," she said. "Okay. So you're doing your best. With what the good Lord gave you."

He filled a plate and held it out to her. She stared at it. "Funny," she said. "Thinking about eating." She looked up. "I think I was in love with Alex," she said. "But you can never really be sure, can you? The more you think about it, the less you can tell. We used to screw a lot. But that doesn't prove anything. Now I'm eating again." She toyed with the food. Finally she pushed the plate away. "They cut him," she said. "Where it hurts. And staked him out. I hadn't got the gun. Not then. Afterwards I thought I was going to have to finish it off. But there wasn't any need."

The sun leveled, pouring light through the westward-facing window. The attendant stared at it and at her. Then he produced a shiny bunch of keys. He shuffled out and she heard the windows being shut, the doors locked. When he came back she laughed. "You're still keeping time," she said unbelievingly. "Toilets open eight a.m. to sunset. You know something? You're through your skull."

She looked thoughtful. "No," she said, "let's work it out." She stared at him. "You were always slow, weren't you?" she said. "I can see you at school. Sitting in the corner hoping nobody would notice. All hunched up with your glasses. You didn't look any different. Even then." She paused. "What were your folks like?" she said. "What did your father do?"

No answer.

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"He didn't earn much," she said. "Or they'd have made something of you. Maybe he worked for the council. Is that how you got the job? Somebody was sorry for him? He must have been disappointed...."

She looked round her. "This place hasn't been up all that long," she said. "What did you do before? In a factory, pulling handles? Or maybe you weren't even smart enough for that. Maybe you swept the floor. And made the tea. You'd do that well. But you wouldn't get any thanks. They used to get on to you, didn't they? Yell at you. Because you were thick. They were still sending you for left-handed screwdrivers when you were forty. They'd think that was funny. And your mother kept house and tried to make the money go round. Did you have any brothers and sisters?"

The other moistened his lips and shook his head fractionally.

She shrugged. "Well," she said, "it wouldn't have made any difference. Your life's the only one nobody could write. Because nothing happened. You never had a girlfriend, did you?"

He winced, and turned away.

She laughed. "No," she said, "you wouldn't have got to first base there. You're one of evolution's dead ends. Well, I'll let you into a secret. It's your nails. They've always been black, haven't they? And we don't like black nails. We think about the foreplay." She leaned back. "Nobody ever told you that, did they?" she said. "And it's a bit late now. But they say it's never too late to learn."

She lit a cigarette. "What did your mother say, when you got the job? Or maybe she was dead by then. Had enough. Maybe they'd palmed you off onto an aunt."

The other frowned. His lips moved, forming a word.

"Auntie," she said. "We're making progress. You were living with your auntie. You didn't like that either, did you? But you'd found a way out by then. You'd got this job. It was all you ever wanted. You could open the doors and shut them and polish the pipes and scrub the floors, and it was yours. All yours. You were grateful, weren't you? Really grateful. That's why you're keeping it up together. In case they ever come back. They won't, but you're not to know that." She shook her head. "Maybe you'd got the bed here before the bombs," she said. "They were just a relief, weren't they? They meant you didn't have to go back any more. Get underfoot. Or maybe you just liked the stones. Is that it? Do you like the stones?"

His eyes flickered toward her and away.

"No," she said. "They don't mean anything to you. Why should they? They don't mean anything to anybody. It was this. The quiet, and being on your own. You'd given up worldly things. They got too much for you." She laughed again. "You know what? You're a hermit. Or a saint. Did you

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ever think of that?" She shook her head. "I can see the attraction," she said. "The shadows moving round, and the clouds. And the cistern flushing, filling itself back up. It wouldn't do for me though. I haven't got that sort of patience."

She stubbed the cigarette. "You'd got it made," she said. "Then I turned up. Threw it all out of gear. You don't know what to do about me, do you? You don't have any idea."

She fell silent, in the growing dusk. The other looked toward her, and away. He picked at his nails, self-consciously; then frowned, fell to scratching at a food stain on his shirt. Finally she moved. She put her sock on, carefully, laced the boot. A shelf beside her held a stack of blankets; she took them down, inspected them and rolled them into a bundle. She said, "I'm going to get some sleep. But not here. This isn't your lucky night." She held her hand out. She said, "Give me the keys. To the other side."

"Yes," she said. "That gets to you, doesn't it? Like asking for your glasses. They're all you've got, you're no good without them. But I still want them." She snapped her fingers. "*Keys....*"

He jumped. Then he put his hand into his pocket. He took out the bunch of keys, divided it clumsily. He pushed the smaller set toward her and drew back again.

"Thanks," she said. She stared down at him a moment longer, the gun on her shoulder. Then she turned away.

He waited, huddled in the chair. He heard the outer door of the place open and close, and a footstep, distant and light. Like water. He moved then, quickly, ran to the party wall and crouched by it, head bent as if listening. But there were no further sounds.

When it was almost full dark he took a candle from one of the shelves and lit it. He found a square of cardboard, pushed it into the aperture of the single window. He lifted the bunk blankets then and pulled out a scrapbook. It was dog-eared and much thumbed. He crouched with the candle, and began to turn the pages.

He woke at first light. He walked through the station and unlocked the outer door. Mist was lying waist-high, across the road and between the stones. He stared at them awhile, then turned and plodded in the opposite direction.

Deep in the wood he paused. There was a scuffling, at the foot of a gnarled, spreading tree. He stooped. The wire had taken the rabbit by the back legs. One of them was all but severed; round the wound the fur was dark and clotted. He found a stone, smashed the creature's skull with it. Then he took a penknife from his pocket. He paunched and skinned the animal, haggled its head off. He wrapped the meat in a square of sacking and stood up.

The rest of the snares were empty. He retraced his steps. By the time he

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reached the edge of the wood, the sun was breaking through. The mist layers shone golden, though the station was still in shadow. The girl was coming out of the door. She had the gun on her shoulder and was carrying her shirt in her hand. Below her neck her body was much paler. Nearly white.

On the fringes of the wood the bracken fronds grew graceful and tall, nearly as high as his head. He ducked back, into the concealing green. She stared, it seemed straight at him; but she didn't enter the trees. Instead she moved away along the edge of the copse. He followed, at a distance.

On the far side of the tongue of trees was a little hollow, bright now with sunlight. Beside it another of the outcrops of rock. She spread the shirt out on it, and other things. She sat down beside the rock, her back to him and her arms round her knees. She didn't move again.

It was midday when she returned. She had put the shirt back on. The stew was simmering on the little gas ring. She sniffed appreciatively.... She said, "Something smells good."

The meal was ready by the evening. She ate, it seemed with more appetite. When she had finished she lit a cigarette. She said, "I was thinking. About what I said. It was nearly the same for me. I was a teacher when it all started. I didn't know what I wanted either." She blew smoke. "Aren't you going to tell me about yourself?"

He shook his head. He had never found much use for words. They betrayed him constantly, stumbling and slithering, out of his control; and, now, there was no help in them. He risked a glance at her. Her hair looked different somehow. Shinier. She flicked it back. She said, "I saw you in the wood this morning. Did you see me?"

He turned away. He felt his face burning, and his ears. He collected the dishes and began to wash them. She laughed. "You'll have to get used to it," she said. "Happiness is a clean pair of knickers."

He bit his lip and nearly dropped a plate.

She stuck her foot out. "My ankle's much better today," she said. "Look, it's not half as swollen."

He darted a glance, still fumbling with the cloth.

She stood up. "I'm going to walk," she said. "Just as far as the stones. Do you want to come?"

He shook his head, confused, and she shrugged. She said, "I just don't think you want me around."

He watched her surreptitiously, from the window. She had the gun on her shoulder again. She never went anywhere without it. She crossed the grass to the first of the stones. She put her hand out curiously, touched the lichened surface. Then she squatted down, sat staring fixedly toward the south.

There were long cloud streaks on the horizon. The sun dropped behind them and darkness came quickly. He

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stared till he could no longer see her. Then he turned away. He put the square of cardboard over the window and lit the candle. He stood a further time undecided. He took the keys from his pocket, frowned at them, put them back again. Finally he went to the bunk. He glanced round him, then took the scrapbook out, settled with it on his lap.

She came back so quietly he didn't hear her. Not till the door opened. By then it was too late. His hands darted, left and right; he lost the precious second it would have taken to hide the book again.

She said curiously, "What was that? What did you put under the bed?"

He made a noise.

She held her hand out. "Come on," she said. "It can't be all that terrible. Let's see how you really spend your time."

She walked forward, reached to the blankets. He scrabbled, and his hand brushed her forearm. He jerked it back instantly, as if he had received an electric shock.

She stared at him. She said, "What a funny little man you are." She lifted the blankets, unopposed, withdrew the book. She opened it. For a moment she looked baffled. Then she began to laugh. "Southsea, 1979," she said. "Couldn't you find anything better than that? And look at this one. Come to sunny Eastbourne...."

She flicked through the pages. The bikini girls smiled back at her, from brochure covers, fading, ill-gummed newsprint. She shook her head. "At least they're all brunettes," she said. "Shows some taste I suppose...." She put the thing down. "Well," she said, "so much for saintliness. What was the matter? Daren't you buy *Playboy?*

He stared at the floor, trembling.

"Just a minute," she said. She picked the book up again, sat at the table. She leafed through it more slowly. "There's something about them," she said. "It's more than just the hair. They're all a type, aren't they? You collected them for years...." She narrowed her eyes. "What were you doing?" she said. "Trying to remember? Was there somebody, once? Somebody you knew? Who was she?"

No answer. She hardly expected one.

"No," she said. "Nobody you knew...." She put her head on one side. "Someone you saw," she said. "Maybe only once. Where was she? In a car? On the beach?"

Nothing.

"Where was it?" she said. "Was it Southsea? Is that why you kept the brochure?"

The attendant began to exhibit signs of distress.

"Southsea," said the girl. "How old were you? Twelve? Thirteen? Were you there with your parents? Perhaps it was the daughter at the digs." She started to laugh again. "I can see it all," she said. "You poor little bastard. Pull-

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ing your winkle, trying to get it on the sheets. Nothing you could do, was there? It's things like that that start Revolutions. And it stayed in your head too, didn't it? All those years, buzzing around." She stared at him. "What did you do instead? To get your mind off it? Collect seashells? Watch the ships?" She closed the book, sat a moment thinking. "Look," she said finally, "won't you tell me? Get rid of it? You've never had anybody else who'd listen. But I will." She paused. "You could get it off your back," she said. "It's been there long enough. You really could be a saint then."

A silence, that lengthened. Then she sighed. "I don't expect you can," she said. "Not after all this time. It's part of you, isn't it? Like an animal. Always running round the same little track." She stood up and shouldered the gun. "I only came back because I'd run out of cigarettes," she said. "Can I have some?" The other didn't look at her, and she walked to the shelf, took a packet from the carton. She stared at him once more and went out. The door closed behind her, silently. She found him next morning squatting among the stones. He tensed when he saw her, and for a moment it looked as if he was going to bolt.

She said, "Hello." She squatted down beside him. "I looked all over for you," she said. "I thought you'd done a bunk." She pulled a stem of grass, and leaned back. "I had a funny dream," she said. "About the stones. I came out and the road had vanished. And the woods. Nothing there at all. Just the stones; and sort of rolling clouds. We were marooned. Crazy, wasn't it?" She grinned. "Heloise and Abelard," she said. 'Modern style."

He sat frowning, head turned away, picking at the grass beside him with little nibbling movements of his fingers.

She sucked the straw, thoughtfully. "Look," she said finally, 'I'm sorry about last night. It's not your fault. You can't help being a victim of advertising. And I'm sorry I laughed. it wasn't at you though. I don't suppose you'll understand it, but I was laughing at God."

He made no response, and she tried again. "Look," she said, "I know it isn't easy for you. I'm her again, aren't I? All the faces come together. After the first few years. But I'm not her really. I'm just somebody passing through." She wriggled her foot. "I shall be moving out tomorrow," she said. "I wanted to leave you with something better than that rotten little book." She sighed. "You must have had your chances," she said. "Everybody has their chances. Why didn't you take them? We're all alike really. If you turn us bottoms up."

The wind rose, moving the grass with its bobbing yellow heads.

"It's not easy for us either," she said. "I know you don't believe that. But it's true."

The silence extended, till, suddenly

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it seemed, she became aware of the oppression of the megaliths. Their weight, the massiveness where they leaned and crouched in the grass. She said, "Perhaps you were right all along." She sat up, arms round her knees. "Look at the stones," she said. "Look at that one there, it's as big as a house. And the one next to it. The pillar. Have you noticed they're all in pairs? The pillar and the big flat diamond?" She shook her head. "You couldn't get away, could you?" she said. "Nobody gets away. Even here. There's only one Secret. In all the world. The stones know it. And so do you."

In the afternoon he wandered, deep into the wood. He didn't want to be near the station. Neither could he go away. He felt tethered, like a dog. Dusk was falling when he returned, the mist already starting to make its shapes among the trees. The station was empty, and his room. He stood on the carpark undecided, hesitant, rubbing his head, blinking, taking little short steps forward and back. Finally he scratched at the storeroom door. It was a little noise. Ashamed, like a mouse.

She opened it. He waited, hanging his head. She said, "You got your courage up. I wondered if you might. It isn't any use though."

He raised his eyes, then flicked them aside. Her shirt was unfastened, right down to her waist.

"It's all right" she said. "I don't mind you looking. It's all you can do, you poor little sod."

He twisted his hands together.

"Look," she said, "I'd like to take it away from you. For good. But I can't. Don't you see that?"

His face twitched. He didn't look up.

She shook her head. "You don't believe me, do you?" she said. "Then I'll show you." She moved forward. She took his hand, guided it under her shirt, made the fingers knead and press. "You've never done that before, have you?" she said. "Just dreamed about it. But you're doing it now. Is it nice?"

He snatched his arm back, suddenly. He stood gripping his wrist, staring at his fingers.

"I told you," she said gently. "You're a bookworm. It could never be any good. It would never have been any good with *her*. Do you understand now?"

His voice, when he finally used it, was thick and creaking. Like the earth. He said, "Good-by."

She leaned toward him. He felt her lips brush his forehead. "Don't look for me in the morning," she said, "I shall be a long way off." She touched his hands. "Good night," she said. "Happy dreams."

She closed the door and leaned against it. She rubbed her face, squeezed the bridge of her nose. She rolled blankets for a pillow and lay on her back, staring at the ceiling.

Her own sleep was disturbed. She

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turned and threshed, woke to hear an owl call above the woods. Finally she dozed. When she opened her eyes again, the little window was already showing blue-grey light.

She got up and buttoned her shirt. She walked through to the station, used one of the cubicles. She washed her hands, ran her fingers through her hair. She filled the canteen and slung the automatic onto her shoulder. She stepped outside yawning, walked round the front of the building. She paused, staring across to the stones; and a foot scraped behind her.

She said, "You're up early." Then her eyes dilated. She flung herself to one side, clawing at the gun.

The noise of the shots startled birds up from the wood, rushed out huge across the stones. Concrete chips flew, the fawn brick was pitted. She yelled, and galvanic reaction carried her through the doorway. Silence returned.

The man lowered his gun. He was tall and broad-shouldered, with a dark blonde stubble of beard. He wore the remnants of a khaki uniform; on his head, set aslant, was a battered forage cap. He glanced behind him, gestured and edged forward.

She was sitting against the first of the cubicles, her shoulders pressed to the blue-painted wood. Her hands were to her stomach. She had dropped the gun; it lay six feet from her, in the middle of the floor. She saw the soldier dimly, bulky as a bear. Behind him hovered the attendant. She rolled her head at that. She whispered, "No. You couldn't...."

She tried to move, but her legs, it seemed, would no longer obey her. At the third attempt she rolled over. She began to work her way across the floor, hotching on her elbows. Behind her she left a lengthening dark puddle. The soldier waited till her fingers touched the butt of the automatic; then he shot her unhurriedly through the heart. He walked forward, scooped the

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gun up by its strap and slung it on his shoulder. He turned away then, without a word.

It was an hour before the attendant returned. He edged round the door and stood a long time watching, his hands behind him against the wall. He crept to her, finally. He rolled her over, tried to lift. But she was heavier than she looked, and her head would loll, her eyes stare so. Finally he fetched a scarf, with which he blindfolded her. He set her upright, puffing, began to drag her toward the door. Her heels extended the puddle, waveringly; outside, the marks lost themselves on the asphalt. He looked round him, blinking in the sunlight; then began to move again, jerkily, across the carpark to the fringes of the wood. Where the bracken spread its bright green fronds, closing him from view.

The shadows were lengthening before he reappeared. He seemed dazed, and his walk was unsteady, so that as he reached the doorway of the station, he put out a hand to steady himself against the jamb. He walked to the first of the basins, began to wash his arms. Then it seemed he became aware of the state of his clothes. He whimpered and ran into his room. He reappeared wearing a fresh shirt and trousers. He crossed to a locker, blue-painted like the rest, took out a bucket and mop. He worked methodically, swabbing the edges of the great pool, changing the water often. He finished finally, emptied the bucket into the channel; and the urinal flushed, with a steady hissing. The last of the stain swirled away, and the cistern began to refill.

He put the cleaning things back into the cupboard. He walked round, locked both outer doors. He pushed the square of cardboard over the window and lit the candle. Crockery lay in the sink; he washed it, setting the cup and plate she had used carefully to one side. He whimpered again, formally; then he curled up in the corner with his book.

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John Shirley is a songwriter and sf writer with stories in Clarion III, Universe, Asimov's SF Magazine *and others. He has a suspense novel, THE BRIGADE, coming from Playboy Press and recently sold an sf novel, CITY COME A WALKIN', to Dell. His first story for F&SF introduces a most engaging team: Galactic Tourist Agent Quill Tripstickler and his robot servant, Fives.*

Quill Tripstickler Eludes A Bride

BY

JOHN SHIRLEY

"But I don't *want* a Roving Assistant, dad." Quill Tripstickler protested to the vidscreen image of his father, tachyon-transmitted from Earth.

"Oh, we're not calling him a Roving Assistant, son," said his father in his usual ringing effusion. "So you needn't worry. He's a *butler.*"

"But why do I need a butler? And what *is* a butler?"

"A butler," said his father's rather menacingly three-dimensional image — Quill could have wished the image less prepossessingly real — "is an, ah, assistant to a gentleman."

"What is a gentleman? I don't wish to be notorious for my kindness; T-agenting is a tough business. Gentleness isn't always —"

"No, no. A butler is a servitor."

"A cyberserv? I don't *want* a cyberserv, dad! They're always telling you what to do and looking over your shoulder and clucking disapprovingly. I have one machine working with me and that's enough. My ship's computer —"

"Actually, my boy," his father interrupted with a trace of impatience, "this butler *is* your ship's computer. That is, it is a drone extension unit of your computer. By transmission. Your ship will remain at the port, but your computer will send this extension out with you. You almost got yourself killed or altered or something on the last mission. This time I want you accompanied to minimize the bumbling. And that's *all* there is to say on the matter." His father's image bristled with authority. It bristled, furthermore, with the currently fashionable mobile wires extruding from their scalp implants. His father, being a conservative, wore his bristles in the old-style Bozo-hair

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clown's halo, the pate inlaid with a subdued shade of violet; both his eyes were the same color, a stodgy grey, further declaration of his belief in gentlemanly understatement; he wore his own nose, bisected only once. His father's round, unaltered face glowed, literally, with the accepted *hues of determination,* particularly in the constricting and expanding red and yellow spirals on the cheeks.... Quill blinked and forced himself to look away from his father's hypnotic visage.

"As you will have it, father."

"The butler will, moreover, be keyed with certain phrases, for the sake of Security, which only you will know by reason of their antiquity. When you want him to nix an ongoing process, you will say, 'What a beastly idea! The rotter!' When you want him to perform an affirmative action — for example you want to placate the natives but you don't want them to know that's what you're going to do — you say, 'I say! Bracing go, what?' When you want him to get you out of a situation and initiate a general retreat you will shout, 'Rummy! Bit thick, what?' These key phrases are for emergencies only. Ordinarily he will act quite independently.... Now, what about your appearance? Do you want to go to your second mission looking like a devo?" Father Tripstickler alluded to Quill's propensity for a nonaltered appearance. He went about looking as he did naturally, which was considered quite rude and backward in the Earth system colonies. Moreover, his aspect was not particularly the Masculine Prototype, which was the only fashionable forte for unaltered men. Quill was gangly, narrow in the shoulders, rather long in the arms; his every effort at reduction failed to shrink his potbelly; his narrow brown eyes and long nose were somewhat compensated by his full and sensual red lips; he wore his own hair, considered by some very bad taste indeed, and he wore it in a close-cut cap of brown. His neck was long and his adam's apple bobbled like a ping-pong ball on a water jet. "Won't you at least," his father pushed on peevishly, "have your chest expanded and your stomach shrunk? Won't take but an hour. And perhaps a neck shortening —"

"No *thank* you, Father." He'd always been stubborn in these matters, had Quill. It was forbidden to alter prior to age ten. And in the early years he'd developed a very defensive rationale for his appearance, exercised to such a state of refinement that he had at last become convinced, utterly and forever, of his own personal beauty. His nose, he felt, was the prow of an ambitious, forward-moving man; his paunch was the swell of the sensualist; his narrow shoulders and gangliness he interpreted as compact and loose-limbed; his neck was 'swanlike.' In addition he possessed other enviable attributes; one physical feature in particular, invariably applauded by young ladies, which delicacy forbids detailing here.

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"You will take the out-shuttle from the Station — ah, is your leg quite grown back from the last mission?" his father asked, silvery-wired eyebrows raised.

"Yes, father."

"Very good. Then you will take the out-shuttle to the spacejump point, tube to your ship and find the butler waiting therein. Your navigation unit is already fixed for the destination. You are to go to Sil and marry the Yee, forthwith."

"What?"

"You heard me. It will be necessary in order to soothe the native xenophobia. The Sils are notoriously mistrustful of offworlders. That's why the Bureau finds it necessary to dispatch an agent. The marriage will be only the duration of a cycle, no more. A mere inconvenience. The details are not at hand.... Now, I have a Wisdom for you to Intake —"

Quill involuntarily groaned.

Father Tripstickler's aureola of mobile wires, sensitive to his moods, shifted restively, quivering with anger.

Quill sighed. He murmured the Home Mantra and said, "Very well. I'm on hypnotic Intake, father. Speak it."

Father Tripstickler cleared his throat and recited: "A Tripstickler's prospects are his to command/because he's got grit to his wit and sand in his glands.'"

Wincing, Quill said, "It is Intaken, father."

As his father's vidimage vanished, Quill reflected: Marry the Yee to mollify the Sils? The path of a Galactic Touristry Agent, Fifth Class — was strewn with broken glass.

"It's positively paradisical!" Quill exclaimed, stepping from the airlock-to-ground elevator. "Quite a contrast to the last dive I had for assignment."

"I fear, young master," said the butler, rolling on his (the butler's masculine voice, however artificial, prompted Quill to think of it in terms of the male pronoun) brassy wheels onto the sward beside Quill, "that on Sil the various adages reminding us of the treacherous nature of appearances will prove to be vindicated."

"No doubt father programmed you to be as dour as he is, butler, but the place looks flawless to me."

"Perhaps you should refer to me as Fives, young master, since I am the fifth model from the prototype."

Quill eyed the robot with displeasure. "Cease to call me young master."

"Very good, sir." The robot (looking almost human, to the casual glance, from the wheels up) nodded his bowler hat-topped head — the motor powering the neck whirring slightly — and made a salutation gesture with his white-gloved right hand. His almost expressionless flesh-colored plastiflex face raised an immaculate eyebrow in enquiry; his glassy brown eyes glittered; his perpetually pursed lips parted

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minutely as he asked, "Do you propose, sir, to await a delegation here, or shall we go to the descent chute?"

"Descent chute? Descent? *Down?* They live underground?"

"This is in fact the case, sir."

"How perfectly idiotic! With all this fine landscaping up here! And, come to that, why is it that you've been so damnably reticent about coughing up the data on this place?"

"To be perfectly frank, sir, I was instructed not to relinquish the salient details until we were firmly planetside."

"What? It's as bad as all that? You know, they send us Fifth Classers out to open up the future Meccas of the touristing curious only because we're expendable and they know these brutish places are —"

"Undoubtedly, sir.... Perhaps we should proceed to the chute." Fives led the way through a fragrant copse of azure lacy-leaved trees, quivering giddily under an emerald sky; the feathery grasses curled away at the touch. A stream, which Quill took to be water but which at closer inspection proved to be a wending passage of crystalline gel, ribboned through the trees to vanish between the low yellow-furred hills.... "Lovely oxy-balanced atmosphere," Quill grumbled. "Why do you suppose they — Ah! This must be the entrance." Jutting rather cruelly from the soft turf, a man-high pyramid of metal was open at the nearer face, as if expectantly. The robot rolled unhesitatingly inside, Quill followed with less alacrity. The door slid shut behind them; the chamber descended for the interval of ten seconds, opening into a wide breezy passageway, rock-walled.

As they'd descended, Quill had been toying with the notion that someone had deliberately misinformed him as to the citizenry of Sil. He'd been informed that they were not only quite human (but come to think of it, the phrase the computer had used was 'quite human, *in the main*'), they were lineal descendants of an Earth colony. Time, however, having whistled its tuneless way for nine generations since the original colonists, had had an insular effect on the community. The Sils did not tolerate outsiders, normally, and no Earther had been on or under Sil for three of the nine generations.... But since they apparently found the upper atmosphere unendurable, perhaps they were not human after all, Quill mused. Perhaps —

As the door opened, he was relieved to learn that he was quite wrong. They were not only human, they were a society which eschewed cosmetic surgery modifications, Quill noted approvingly. The three men awaiting him, faces wrapped in wide smiles, were squat and pale, hair falling straight and dark to their shoulders; they wore grey suits of rather coarse cloth, sackcloth in fact, and no shoes, though the rocky floors were unevenly cut and sharply studded in places. All three men seemed very similar to one

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another, with their pug noses and large black eyes, their receding hairlines and pointy teeth — but doubtless a native would discern more in the way of distinctions.

Having had a hypno-Intake of the Sil language prior to landing, Quill understood the shorter of the three men perfectly when he said: "May your way be strengthening."

"Productive stress to you," Quill responded, wondering at the origin of the phrase.

Quill bowed. "I am Quill Tripstickler, Galactic Tourist Agent and nonofficial diplomat of the Earth system"

"I am Chromosome Regent," the little man replied in a soft, nasal voice full of dignity. "With me are my assistants, B. and A. You may address me as, Your Perseverance."

"Ah! A charming titular cognomen, I'm sure."

"As our Honored Guest, you have, of course, been provided with the most noble of quarters," said His Perseverance. "If you will be so kind as to follow...." But as he was about to turn into the corridor, his eyes lit on the robot for the first time. He seemed dismayed. "What is this — contrivance?"

Quill cleared his throat. "This grotesque contraption is, I fear, resolutely attached to my activities. He is my servant, Fives."

Fives bowed faintly.

His Perseverance took an alarmed step back. "We do not normally permit independently operating unbred machinery in the Sil City. Still," he continued, shrugging, viewing Fives with unhidden distaste, "since Q.T. is the Yee's Groom, one or two special accommodations will be made."

It was Quill's turn to experience dismay when Fives, smiling wanly, observed: "Sadly, my machineries are of less distinguished gestation than your own fleshly workings, sir. I can but hope the test of time is kind to one, such as myself, originated without the benefit of Your Perseverance's immaculate chromosomal heritage."

Quill bit off an apology, composed on the robot's behalf, when to his surprise he observed that the Regent seemed pleased with Five's allusions to his ancestors. "You have drilled the machine well," the Regent said. He turned and hopped down the hallway, squeaking. Quill watched, astonished, as A. and B. followed suit, hopping and squeaking down the corridor. He noted that they walked on the right side of the hall where the floor was sharply studded — apparently no accident — in a meandering pathway like a narrow, lengthy bed of nails.

"They are courting the pain?" Quill asked, in a whisper aside to Fives.

"That is in fact the case, sir. They are not masochists, however, as we understand the term. They are displaying their indifference to adversity arising from allegedly superior genetic derivation. Natural Selection is the root of this culture, sir."

"If this implies what I think it does

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for myself, perhaps we had better return to —"

"Begging your pardon, sir, but your father instructed me to remind you, when you displayed a lack of decisiveness, to remember the Tripstickler Wisdom, *A Tripstickler's prospects are his to command* —"

"No, no! Never mind, don't repeat it! I'm going!" So declaiming, Quill Tripstickler began to negotiate the spiky pathway, uttering squeaks and squeals which, by reason of his soft-soled shoes, were perhaps more genuine than the cries uttered by the more experienced Sils.

Did you hear what he said, Fives? I asked him why they preferred this chilly underground to the Eden above, and he said, 'Don't you find it rather awfully *tolerable* up there, Groom Tripstickler?' This is beginning to look worse than the last dratted planet they sent me to. And that's bad. The last place was underground, too. In my admittedly formulative opinion, subterranean cultures have subterranean motives. I don't trust these people. And what do they mean leaving me in a steamy, insufferable pink chamber with sickening textured walls? Well, Fives?"

Fives opened his mouth to reply, coughing respectfully, but Quill did not pause in his tirade. "I mean, damn it, Fives, what have these people got in mind for me? Did you feel those jets of icy air blowing for no conscionable reason across the hallways? And that nasty obstacle course of pink cilia whipping from the walls? I mean, really, I've got talent and determination and, God help me, sand in my glands, but sometimes one is called on to perform absurdly in unsporting circumstances and — well, really, my forté is making charming converse with Ladies of Note and exchanging mild, endearing gibes with local constabularies, not sliding down horrible sticky red escalators —"

"I fear that you are laboring under a misconception, sir," Fives broke in gently, his head whirring as it turned to follow Quill's impatient pacing. "The 'sickeningly textured walls' and 'horrible sticky red escalators,' as you so colorfully have it, are in fact extensions of the Urban Womb, the flesh-machine, the edifice and organic device developed by Sil's peerless genetic engineers. From —" He gestured at the walls, "— human chromosomes."

Quill gazed with undiluted repulsion at their surroundings. "You don't mean to say —?" The low-ceilinged chamber was moist, its walls concave and translucent grey-pink, shot with pulsing blue. The ceiling twitched tiny socketed palps, an overhead living carpet. "See here, Fives, you don't mean that —"

"I do indeed, sir. All the facts of the matter, such as how the marriage is to be consummated, are not available to us. But we *do* know that the entire

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lower section of the Sil City is taken up by an, ah, organism. An engineered mutation which had its roots in human cell structure. The walls of the chamber are of human skin. The sticky escalator we descended is based on a tongue, much modified and expanded. The doorway —"

"Good Nirvana!" Quill expostulated, examining the entranceway. It was now constricted shut, a great pinkish-grey muscle clenched around a circular aperature; it dilated outward in all directions when opening.... Quill shook his head and sat down on the flesh floor, legs crossed and elbow on knee, chin in hand. He glanced at Fives. The robot butler stood curiously immobile, one hand hitched in a pocket of his waistcoat, head tilted at an awkward angle. "Fives — why haven't we seen any women? I saw some children, once, but they were all boys. Looked miserable, too, if I may say so. I mean, I studied erotic persuasion for a solid year, took a blue in it too. My best subject. I had the touch, they said. It puzzled them, but it's always been that way with Tripsticklers. The fingertip electricity, Fives; the alluring set of the jaw; the penetrating glance; the magnetism — most of all, the magnetism, Fives. That's what women melt for. Or men, depending on one's specialty. I — Fives!" He stared at the robot; it hadn't moved. "Fives?"

With a jerk, the robot came awake, moving his head spasmodically from side to side, as if trying to clear it. Quill was dismayed when Fives' head began to jack up on his neck, rising over his shoulders and rotating. The absurd spectacle of a butler, with his bowler hat and an expression emphatically dignified, his head three feet over his shoulders on an impossibly protracted neck, caused Quill to laugh involuntarily.

"There really is no appropriate subject for levity, sir," said Fives, looking at Quill with a faintly wounded pout to his prissy lips.

"Sorry, Fives. It's just that you look so awkward and funny."

"I'm afraid this elevation is quite requisite for the moment, sir. You see, there is a thunderstorm raging on the planet's surface above —"

"No doubt the Sils are all above, enjoying the discomfort."

"Yes, sir. As I was saying, the storm, together with the ground and the stone-casings and the Urban Womb, are having a rather dampening effect on the transmissions from my brain aboard our craft. I was cut off entirely for a short interval, sir. And I find that only at this elevation can I pick up the signals with any consistency — so it will have to remain, until the storm abates."

"Why aren't there any women down here, Fives? I thought you said these people are human...."

Fives made a sound very like the clearing of a throat. "*Chiefly* human might be a better term, sir. There is, however, only one woman, at this

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stage in the Sils' development, and that is the Yee. She is the product of genetic manipulation. The original women, we have heard, split off from the men some generations back, having become very militant and self-sufficient. They reproduce through cloning. They live on the other side of the planet, and, as they are more warlike than the men, they are considered unreachable."

"But, damn it — am I to actually mate with this *Yee* person?"

"Just so, sir. The reasons are as follows: The Sils worship the DNA molecule. They are neosociobiologists, one of their patron saints being the ancient Earth scientist Skinner. They believe that the DNA molecule has some sort of intellectual capacity in its relationship with all others of its type, that in resonating together in a special divine frequency these molecules communicate and form a great mind that is constantly trying to improve itself with Natural Selection, trying to become stronger and more prone to easy survival. The Sils respect only those who are approved through their survival-of-the-fittest winnowing procedure. They refused to open the beauteous surface of Sil for touristry until a representative of the People who will be visiting here, someone from the Earth colonies which provide the tourists, has gone through the natural-selection tests and then mated with the Yee. If the Yee refuses to mate with you, finds you chemically inprovidential —"

"What? I beg your pardon —"

"Nothing personal, sir. To continue, if she finds you unsuitable, the Sils will consider this decision a reflection on your entire race and will not permit touristry."

"Yes? Well, I doubt," Quill said, puffing — rather inconsequentially — his thin chest and stroking his hair into place, "that she will be disappointed. But a dire question remains: what of this natural-selection procedure? This does not bode well, Fives. No, indeed. I understand now why so little briefing was given me on the mission. Well, a great man turns the tide of adversity and shakes hands with the hand of fate. But, then, it was also wisely said that discretion is the better part of valor. So perhaps we'd best retreat for a time to the sanctity of our ship to reflect on the matter, eh —"

Fives was shaking his elevated head sadly. As he did so, the top of his bowler, in contact with the low ceiling, nuzzled the skin overhead in its pivoting — there came a quivering, and the ceiling seemed to giggle from deep within itself. "I think not, sir," Fives was saying. "Your father asked me to remind you —"

Just then the doorifice dilated, with a sickening air-rush noise, to allow the Regent to step through, followed by A. and B. —

"The time for the Test is come," said the Regent reverently.

Quill stood, turning to Fives a pleading look.

Fives seemed to be having more dif-

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ficulty picking up his mind signal from the ship's computer. His head snapped back and forth, the eyes blinked unevenly, the mouth snapped open and shut. The Regent eyed the robot disapprovingly.

The ceiling giggled.

B. bowed and laid out a sackcloth for Quill. "Your testing suit, Q.T. The Groom."

"Ah." Quill cleared his throat, examining the hairshirt. It was brutally coarse and malodorous. Worse, were he to change into the suit, he'd have to give up the pulsegun tucked into the flat of his belt at the back of his one-piece green agency uniform. The gun might prove to be invaluable.

Quill glanced hopefully at Fives, hoping for inspiration. The robot had got its signal again, for the moment, and made a shrug with shoulders so distantly beneath his chin.

"As to this sackcloth-hairshirt bit, Fives," Quill began, remembering the key phrases for the butler's override his father had given him, "Ah, what a beastly idea! The rotter!"

The Regent and his two clone-variations eyed Quill in puzzlement.

Fives turned to the Regent. "The garb is unsuitable, Your Perseverance."

The Regent looked at Quill's uniform askance. "He wishes to wear this — this *lamb's skin?*"

The butler glanced at Quill, raising an eyebrow as if to say, *Best not to rock the boat, we may be committing a solecism.*

But Quill was determined. "Fives: I say! Bracing go, what?"

The robot nodded and continued, looking down from his height benevolently: "Master Tripstickler is unable to wear the native garb of Sil only because he was babied and raised in clothing very much like it, as his parents were excessively given to pampering, when he was young. He finds your clothing much too comfortable. His own suit is woven from a special metallic thread which at intervals discharges the static electricity it has collected, cruelly jolting the wearer. It's *most* uncomfortable."

"Ahh!" The Regent looked on Quill with what was now admiration and envy.

Quill pretended to jump from a slight electric shock.

"Is the mastication chamber prepared?" The Regent asked A.

"It is, Your Perseverance."

Quill started, thinking: Mastication chamber? For *me?* Perhaps it was time to test the third key override, the one for retreat. It would be interesting to see if the butler could find a way out of the city.... "Fives: Rummy! Bit thick, what?"

Fives was immobile, his signal lost in the storm.

Quill swallowed. "Fives....?"

"We'd best go to the Test now, your Q.T. Groom," said the Regent with a touch of urgency and more than a touch of reprimand. "We're delaying too long. *She* is waiting."

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Quill looked desperately at the butler. "Fives! Rummy, bit thick, what! Rummy, bit thick, what? *What!* Fives!"

The robot remained unmoved.

A. and B. each took one of Quill's arms at the elbow and gently guided him out the doorifice. As he went, he called futilely over his shoulder, "Fives! Bit thick, what? *Bit thick, what!*"

They descended a slanting corridor that was very much like a diagonal esophagus....

They had prodded him through a doorifice; he stepped through, turned around to speak — and the doorifice clenched shut. Although the distant giggling followed his efforts at tickling the doorifice into opening, it remained constricted. He sighed and turned to survey his course. A dim light glowed from bluish veins pulsing in the 'walls,' illuminating an oval tubiform passage gradually ascending to some unknown convergence in the shadow-shrouded distance....

Taking his pulsegun from his belt, he set forth, walking cautiously on the spongy flooring of the passageway, slipping occasionally in its glutinous dampness.

A sweet musky odor came to him at times, occasioning a rather forthright, as it were, physical reaction in him that might have been embarrassing had he not been alone.

"Come to think of it," he muttered, "I have never been *less* alone. *She* is all around me." He pressed on, fighting a pervading sense of claustrophobia. The way steepened increasingly, the angle becoming more difficult with each step, until he was forced to climb by pressing his legs, knees, elbows, toes and hands against the treacherously slick walls. He was worming upward now, sweating with exertion as he dug in his fingers, both sickened and titillated by the viscous giving of the flesh-wall close about him; near to blacking out from the shortness of oxygen in the narrow way, eyes straining in the ill-lit passage.

His every instinct urged him to cut through the walls with his pulsegun, if necessary, to free himself, to escape this cloying trap. His stomach roiled, swept by turns with nausea and euphoria.

He lost track of time; it might have been hours that he squirmed upward through the constricting passage, gasping in the scant air, sweat making his uniform nearly as uncomfortable as a Sil would have preferred.

Twice he felt himself slipping, falling back down the tube, losing traction on the sticky, giving tissues about him — each time he dug in his elbows and knees viciously, and heard, in response, as his descent was arrested, a distant echoing grunt of pleasure and surprise....

The going had become almost vertical. His muscles shouted with pain; his eyes ached for light; and, perhaps

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most tormenting of all, one of his shoes had come untied and he couldn't bend to re-tie it — it dangled, maddeningly, half on his foot, gradually slipping away.

He experienced alarming visions at odd intervals — particularly vivid when the gusts of musk came his way — harking back to his early childhood; very early. Disturbing dreams of maternal punishments, rejections, rewards. There was something frightening about them, as if they precipitated an impending panic, and he knew that, if he were to escape madness, he must emerge from the passage soon. He tried to evade the panic by singing to himself, hopefully a therapeutic distraction. But the only song that would come into his head was:

Oh peel it boys peel it,
the various layers;
interpret the maunderings
of rummy soothsayers.
Conceal it girls conceal it,
the instinctual drive;
You were meant to be more
than gene-chosen wives.
Oh watch it kids watch it,
become like androids;
wonder who was stronger —
Skinner or Freud?

And he'd given up on that one, with a whimper of realization, on the third verse.

He was close to shrieking and falling back — when he noticed an increase in the glow of light from ahead. Heartened, he redoubled his efforts and was shortly rewarded with the sight of the end of the passage.

But the way was blocked. A large, rounded muscle, rather cervical, creased onto a narrow hole not big enough to admit his fist, grew from the passage walls. It was from the aperture at the center of this pumpkin-like muscle that the light escaped, a glow from a chamber beyond.

Quill scowled. He considered. He had seen the Sils open and close doorways by tickling the walls around the doorifices, but one had to know precisely where and how to tickle. Quill was too weary to experiment. His pulsegun hung on a strap from his wrist. He supported himself in the vertical passage with out-thrust knees — the walls grunted — and adjusted the pulse-gun to *Low-level Vibrations*, just below *Stun*. It was a harmless setting. He pressed the pulse-gun into the aperture in the great cervical muscle, and flicked the trigger lightly once. The pulse-gun hummed; the walls groaned; the cervical doorifice dilated, almost reluctantly, in spasms; he pressed the trigger again — the walls giggled rather shrilly, and the doorifice dilated fully. He reached up and pulled himself through.

He was relieved to find himself in a wide chamber. The chamber had no corners, as such; the whole affair was rounded and silky-textured. The atmosphere was deliciously steamy. Quill loosened his collar. He had climbed from the cervical muscle to

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stand on a wide spongy floor, stretching into the distance where he could dimly make out, through bluish mists, a farther wall and some looming shape silhouetted against it.

He set out in that direction, stretching, taking deep breaths, taking a few pugilistic jabs at the air, trying to feel himself again. But the entire episode was taking on a dreamlike quality. "Pheromones," he muttered.

He had taken but ten steps when from out of the quivering tissues underfoot whipped a thick tangle of cilia, each one hair-fine but strong, prettily transparent, gleaming like dewy spiderwebs in the shimmer emitted by the walls. They formed a cocoonlike webbing around his legs, began to wrap him round and round up the thighs, the hips, evenly covering him to the waist, the ribcage, trapping his right arm against his belly — along with the pulsegun. His left arm remained free, but as the cilia enwrapped him further, it seemed this freedom was to be tragically transient. He banged at the webbing thick about his waist with his left fist; it only tightened, as if peeved, in response. The cilia ran from the cocoon to the tissue underfoot in a sort of weave, quivering with his struggles, at an angle from his body like a bell-gown. As the cilia enwrapped his chest, began to reach up for his shoulders, he let his left arm fall in despair against the belling weave, his fingers inadvertently stroking the threads.... The response was instantaneous: the cilia ceased to build its cocoon; the loose threads about to close over his throat came loose and drew back, as if to examine him, their ends shivering....

Encouraged, Quill began to riffle the webbing, as if playing a harp with his fingertips, trilling out seductive melodies on the cilia, tripping enticingly, rhythmically, with gentle urging, each string-flick scarcely more than a caress.

The walls sighed, the cilia shivered and unfolded from him like a nocturnal blossom retreating before the sunlight.

He had, to put it gently, done the right thing.

The atmosphere seemed to quiver with anticipation....

Quill Tripstickler, rightfully feeling dauntless, strode waggishly across the shuddering plain to the monolithic shapes glimpsed through the mist.

He spied a figure approaching and by degrees made out the detestable — as he felt now — Regent, His Perseverance.

"Welcome Groom Q. Tripstickler! I perceive that our confidence in you was justified!" The Regent was fingering a sort of rosary about his neck, whirling the beads 'tween his fingertips in some systematic ritual fashion; looking closer, Quill noted that the rosary was in the shape of a DNA molecule in heliocentric diagram.

Feeling wrung out and put upon, Quill responded sharply, "Is the end in sight?"

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"Ah! You are eager for the consummation. Justifiably. Follow me."

Quill snorted in annoyance. He'd had enough *follow me*. He strode beside the Regent, approaching what appeared to be a huge statue in the distance, putting questions periodically:

"Is the lady — forgive me — personable?"

"She is Paradise," The Regent replied cryptically.

"Can our conjugation be consummated in a nulgrav chamber, perhaps? I was blue-ribbon in erotic persuasion in all circumstances," Quill said proudly and, for once, without exaggeration. "But I specialized in weightless enjoining."

"I'm afraid that is impossible."

"Ah — I dislike to be indelicate, but suppose the Yee finds the experience a fertilizing one? The question of birth control —"

"Do not concern yourself. Your clones will be taken care of — the boys — and selectively winnowed with —"

"I beg your pardon for interrupting," Quill said hastily, "but did you say — clones?"

"Precisely. Every cell of your body will be sorted through, the healthiest chosen for growing the —"

"But how do you propose to obtain *every* cell? I have no qualms as regards donating one or two, conceivably a handful, but there is a limit that every sensible galaxy man will set...."

"Stay your questions, Groom Q. Tripstickler," The Regent said rather severely, wagging a forefinger at Quill. "All will now become lucid and transparent as a gestation membrane of the lower fallopes. You will observe as a young Sil, anxious that his DNA combination achieve immortality through Yee cloning, precedes you in the consummation."

"What? Am I to take second place to an upstart? Are there provisions for the lady's toilet, a shower perhaps, to —"

"It cannot be avoided, Q.T. The Groom. The man preceding you has waited many metabiurnals, deep in Proving, to enjoin with the Yee. Certainly," he added in hasty placation, "your own approaches were superior: You would not be discouraged, you wriggled through her defenses, sidestepped her instinctive refusals and seduced your way from her entrapping possessiveness, in form befitting a classic mating rite. Ah, now: Observe the Yee."

He raised his arms and in reply a great billow of blue mists parted, revealing the details of what Quill had taken to be a statue.

The Yee lay supine, her head to Quill's left, her feet to Quill's right. To be more accurate, her head was twenty-six meters to Quill's right, her feet forty-two meters to his left; he stood in the shadow of her waistline. The giantess lay on her back with her legs well apart, her arms at her side, hands palm down, fingers sunken into the soft surface on which she lay. The paramount

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of her quivering, prettily rounded belly, some three meters above Quill's head, formed a column of flesh where the navel should be that ran in a graceful unbroken sweep to join narrowly with the ceiling. Her great breasts quivered massively as her ribcage rose and fell like a monstrous bellows with her breathing. Her skin was pearly, blue veins lacily evident, pulsing with life under the translucent skin. Even should she defy the stresses of gravity and break her umbilicus, the Yee would never move from her intrauterine repose: her skin, where it should have followed the curve of her body under her back, swept outward to meld with the floor-tissues of the vast chamber; it was thus all the way around, where ever her body came into contact with the flooring. She was an outgrowth of her enclosure.

She was also lovely. She was quite proportionate, a scale-up from a full-bodied human female, classically curved and strong, full of dignity though she lay with legs akimbo. Her face, though in size of appropriate proportions relative to the body, in several ways resembled that of a fetus. The flattened nose, the slitted, sleeping eyes, an unfinished quality about the brow. Her lips, however, were full and purplish-red. For hair she had more of the see-through cilia growing from her scalp, to cascade thickly down before it too merged with the flooring.

Quill swallowed in awe.

Numbly, he followed The Regent to the right; they strolled down the luminously glossy length of leg, past the knee and calves, around a gigantic but somehow delicate ankle and the soft feet — and stood gazing up a study in perspective, the great causeway between her legs, converging in architectural flow to the pubis.

A man stood there, obscuring the great vertical lips opening onto another domain.

He shed his sackcloth and, as Quill watched, climbed between the hairless lips and into the Yee's all encompassing welcome. Quill heard his muffled scream, saw the autonomic contraction of the Yee's vaginal muscles, saw the trickle of blood escape from that cathedralesque cleft....

"And so you see that, sweetly pulped, the Groom is made ready for the chemical mix secreted by the Yee's internal biological laboratory, the thousands of cells in his body surviving intact, floating amidst the rest," The Regent explained clinically, "are allowed to incubate in the sorting baths —"

"Excuse me," Quill interrupted, turning away. He leaned against a massive heel and shuddered. The spell passed. He reached out to steady himself against the sole of her foot — a liquid laughter echoed from the ceiling. Experimentally, he ran a caressing hand down the sole; the great foot wiggled faintly, a happy moan issued from the area of the head. "Sensitive, isn't she?" Quill murmured. He turned to the Regent: "Must this consummation

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be performed with lookers-on? In my culture it is the custom that such things be performed in private —" This was a lie, as regards the present state of the Earth colonies, but the Regent was out of touch with offworld ways.

"Very well. The Yee will signal us that all is well and the happy deed done, when the enjoining is over."

"And I wonder," Quill said, speaking rapidly, "if you might send my servant down to pick up my clothes ... I'd like them sent back to my family."

The Regent rubbed his chin dubiously. "A metal machine in the paradisical recesses? Still, since you are an offworlder, I suppose we must make one or two exceptions. Especially since you have pleased the Yee so well ... so far. It shall be done."

The Regent turned and, deliberately tripping himself to test his ability to catch his fall by rolling before he broke his neck, he made his way pratfalling into the mist and was soon lost to sight.

Quill turned and walked toward the head. He mounted the hand, walked along the back of the hand, over the wrist, and up the arm, progressing delicately, tiptoeing, as if bestowing kisses with his footsteps.

The skin sank under his tread to his ankle; the muscle of the bicep was soft, only rarely flexed. He made his way up the shoulder, having to climb a bit, enjoying the electric contact of her smooth skin under his hands. He continued on his hands and knees over the collarbone, onto the neck, stepping carefully so as not to give her discomfort, and hauling himself up onto her slight chin.

Her eyes were open.

Two pale orbs, their pupils as deep as black holes, the retina blue-grey, focused directly on him.

A chill traveled up his spine, carrying with it a communication.

You are hot like the others.

"No," Quill agreed. He was not disoriented by her telepathy; he'd taken classes in low-level telepathy; and though he hadn't a natural talent for it, would never be a professional, he had some experience with clear reception.

You come to my face, my outer, my Self-image. You come to meet me rather than to take me.

"Taking into account also grace and magnetism, you have just summed up the nub of successful love-making," Quill said, bowing slightly. He sat straddling her chin with his legs, caressing her lips with his hands. He allowed his fingers to slip between her lips, to trifle sweetly with the tip of her tongue. A shudder ran through her.

I feel for you: affinity.

"I am honored, madame."

Your touch is softer than a probe but more than superficial. I wonder if you would be kind enough to apply this touch to an area which my other visitors long have ignored. It is a node of sensation at my nether convergence, and if you were to stand on your tiptoes —

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"I believe," Quill said, "I know the spot you mean." He bestowed a final drawn-out caress to the lips before him. "I will do as you request on one condition: that you signal the Sils —"

My children?

"Yes, my ancient Yee. Signal your children that all is well and our love has been consummated. They must be made to believe that I have been, ah, given the complete treatment for cloning preparations...."

I understand. I learn from sifting through your mind what you wish: A process called lying. It is yours, my love. But you must promise that you will return to bestow your affections on the node of sensation again, three years from now. I should be ready for another, by then.

Quill hesitated but a moment. Three years? A trifle to the Yee, a considerable span of time for Quill; it could be arranged.

Quill, too, was pleasured by the encounter.

"Very well, you have my promise."

Quill slowly, slitheringly, made his way to her formidable crotch. He lowered himself from the mons and stood on the flooring; he had just found the "spot" she'd meant when he was startled by a whirring from behind. He turned and found Fives watching him. "Ah, Fives. I see the storm has abated and you are intact once more. Fine. Just wait on the other side of the leg, there, and I'll join you. Best you steady yourself — there could be a bit of a quake in a few minutes."

"Very good, sir."

...Minutes later, the walls and floor of the great chamber trembled, resounded with the quakings of the orgasming giantess.

Rubbing a sore right arm, Quill joined Fives and asked, "Do you think you can find a way out of this place? Use your sonar or something; get us out past the Sils without their seeing us. Can you do it?"

"I think so, sir. But perhaps we should confer with the Regent first. This mission has not been performed as the Sils would prefer —"

"They'll never know. She promised. I want to go. I'm sick with ennui."

"Nevertheless, sir —"

"Fives!"

"Sir?"

"Rummy! Bit thick, what?"

"Very good sir. This way...."

Observing Sil from orbit just prior to coming into the proper celestial alignment for a spacejump, Quill remarked to Fives: "Something you as a machine will never know, Fives, is the joy of physical love."

"Actually, the process of love-making, so-called, in animals, is quite machinelike in that it is the result of a series of chemical reactions, the interactions of enzymes and various hormones, instinct-implanted psychological obsessions engineered by genetic chemistry —"

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"Don't be tiresome, Fives. The oint is, no one such as myself could :el physical attraction for someone uch as *yourself*, a machine. Lips of lastiflex will never touch mine!"

"That, sir, is a state of affairs which rovides me with considerable com-ort, if I may be so bold."

It seemed to Quill that Fives actually shuddered.

Quill returned his gaze to the vidscreen, watched the planet receding behind them. "The lovely Yee ... three years.... Well, well. I shall repine until then. I wonder," he murmured, "if we could have been happy together."

Two Children

for Ursula Le Guin

Two children shut up in a storm:
their eyes move down the great window
opposite the cold fire. From their eyes
rain-colored tears fall for the sun to find.

Marianne says, "This is the castle,"
and rests one hand shut tight on her knee.

"And this is the forest," John says,
putting both hands together upright
in the watery lightfall from the window.

"Here's the king riding out." Marianne's thumb
straight-backed goes over the moat
of her left arm, shadowless and serene.
"He'll hunt deer, he'll vanquish the enemy,
in the late afternoon he'll ride
his tired horse home to the banquet."

John's face catches the pale shadows
of raindrops running down. "The queen,"
he says, "stands like this on the battlement,"
and his fist lifts into the air. "She waits
so long for the hunter's return
that her hair under the little crown
has turned to white stone."

The rain falls with a musical sound
down the tall glass in the unlit room.
The wind comes. It blows away over the hills.
Two children sit on blue cushions, telling
each other about all the things in the world.

—SONYA DORMAN

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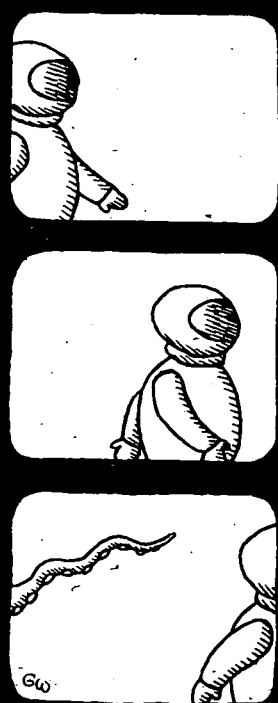
Films

BAIRD SEARLES



A SLACK, HACK BLACK HOLE

Some years back, I paid a visit t Disney World just after it had opene and reported on it for this column There was one hilarious moment whe I found myself steering the Jungl Cruise boat after it had lost power an our regular guide/steersman was hold ing on desperately to the boat behin us that was pushing us through. (You'l never know how tempted I was to stee *through* the waterfall instead of behin it.)

But aside from that impromptu in cident, I noted that Disney World as whole was flat and rather sterile; an interest was in process — the *how* o all these ingenious effects rather tha being captured (or captivated) b them. One left the place, I reported longing for some *real* fantasy.

What I was trying to say, I see i retrospect, was that there was not on whit of imagination used. Ingenuity yes ... cleverness, certainly. But non of that ingredient that makes fantas fantasy.

We all know what a monolithi purveyor of whimsey the Disney ma chine as a whole is, and therefore i should come as no surprise that th long awaited Disney science fictio film, *The Black Hole*, suffers from ex actly the same problem. Despite an ex

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pensive production chockablock with special effects, there's not an iota of imagination at work here. Not in the plot, not in the dialogue, not in the costumes, not in the sets or effects or filming. None.

Now I'm not talking about originality or creativity. *Star Wars* was a mish mosh of old (for s/f) ideas, but they were put together and filmed with (you guessed it) imagination. *Alien* had as trite a plot as possible, but a terrifically imaginative production, and even silly old *Close Encounters* served up a dollop of pizzazz along with the mashed potatos in its final half hour (and I never thought to see the day I'd use *that* film as a positive example).

For those of you who had the good sense not to see *The Black Hole*, a brief precis might be in order (there could be no other kind). It's another one of those interstellar expeditions boldly going whereever it is they boldly go. They come upon the biggest damn black hole anyone ever did see, and find poised at the edge of its gravitational field, an ancient ship, manned only by robots, zombies, and the old familiar scientist who puts knowledge ahead of humanity.

The expedition's robot, Vincent, who is just as cute and cuddly as a squirrel from *Bambi*, goes below stairs to the robots' rec room and there finds a robot of his own make, model, and creed who tells him that the scientist is Not What He Seems (which anyone with half an eye could see anyhow) and wants to go into the Black Hole.

(Irrelevant thought — why does the scientist go through the Black Hole? To get to the other side, of course.)

So after a good deal of mayhem, mugging, and meandering, the ship comes apart and everybody falls into the Black Hole.

I was praying that would be the end of it, but no such luck. However, I'll touch on the Grand Finale later.

Now I can forgive cute robots, even if Vincent speaks in the acidulous tones of Roddy McDowall and his confrere in the down-home accent of Slim Pickens, presumably to edify the Nashville segment of the audience. The robots of *Star Wars were* cute, if on a higher level than here. And considering the Disney Studio's penchant for commercial cuteness, we were lucky not to get any sticky-wicky songs ("Whistle While You Warp," "Who's Afraid of the Big Black Hole," etc.).

And I can forgive a sequence so obviously set up to be the model for a ride at Disney World that I'm surprised we weren't charged extra for it, in which we ride a little kiddy car down a transparent tunnel on the outside of the ship, which is being bombarded by a totally gratuitous meteor shower.

And I can forgive a Black Hole that from a distance looks like a bad night at Laserium, and up close gives the impression of the drain in a bathtub full of Mercurochrome.

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I can even forgive lines such as the one several friends independently swear that they heard, but which I can't vouch for personally because I had apparently gone off into one of several lapses of consciousness that afflicted me during the movie. The line was to the effect that the initial mission of the derelict ship had been "to find habitable life," which gives the wonderful vision of a space ship full of fleas off to find a congenial dog. Lines like that can sometimes *make* a movie.

What I can't forgive is the poverty of imagination that decides, once through the Black Hole, that there must be some cosmic message such as "beyond heaven and hell" (we've already been set up with lines such as "Beyond the BH, one would see the mind of God") and what are we given? Two images from *Fantasia!* One is the chief nasty robot, whose head shape and eye configuration sharply echo the Satan of "Night on Bald Mountain," standing against writhing flames. The other is the Gothic arches from the "Ave Maria," this time in Lucite, with an amorphous angel floating between them. How'd they leave out Mickey Mouse in his dunce cap?

Disney and his studio have been vastly important (though curiously undocumented) in the history of the fantasy film. A Disney movie was probably the first film fantasy any of us saw, and back in the early days there was genius at work there. It's too bad that the first Disney attempt at hard core science fiction should be this stale, flat, weary, and (judging from reports of box office business) unprofitable. Personally I'll take one intelligent, imaginative — if flawed — attempt at filming s/f such as *The Lathe of Heaven*, on which I reported last month, for every ten overblown, underinspired efforts like *The Black Hole*.

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This remarkable and totally original story is the first F&SF appearance of R. M. Lamming, who writes that she was born in the Isle of Man in 1949 and was educated at a public school in Wales and then at Oxford. She has worked as a teacher, a librarian, a bookseller and contributed short stories to various monthlies and anthologies. She now lives in North London at the top of a house that rocks like a ship and has a crow's nest view of several yards of British Rail.

The Ink Imp

BY

R. M. LAMMING

That morning it rained in Skelpton, solid, businesslike rain, the kind that quickly saturates your collar, and, worse, it was full of dirt, which I suppose is the price we pay for building a town of factories. In Skelpton everything is contaminated: the brickwork is black, all black; the shop windows are glazed with a grey deposit; parlor curtains hang limp and pale, their colors muted by the overlay of grime, while every railing and ledge has its black coat of velvet turning to inky liquid in the rain and ruining your clothes when you brush against it. The very townsfolk are affected; even the youngsters have strangely discolored faces that look the consistency of tired rubber, with lines around the mouth and eyes that are too well defined, as if they had been sketched in with a black pencil.

Skelpton, you will appreciate, is nowhere out of an idyll. Is it not where most of us would choose to launch a literary career. In fact I can think of no one who would choose such a place besides my brother, but, then squalor had always attracted him. The hovels of poverty, the filth of modern industry with its furnaces and engines, they hold some diabolical fascination for him; and I remember that even when we were children, while I played by the trout stream, Marcus always had to be grubbing about in rubbish tips left behind by the Gypsies.

"More interesting," he would say, "more fun."

Fun! I cannot pretend that we ever understood each other or felt for each other any great affection; after his break with the family, I had not expected to hear from him. Consequently

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I was the more perplexed....

Inside the cab, while it rumbled and splashed through the Skelpton streets, I took his card from my overcoat pocket as I had done many times on the journey, and studied it meticulously. A more disturbing and enigmatic communication I had never received from anyone.

In the top right-hand corner on one side, Marcus had given his address:

36 Water Tower Street
c/o Mrs. Brideson

And this was written clearly enough in the hand I recognized — large, assertive letters, all sloping forwards at a nicely calculated angle — but then followed the heart of the thing in writing that I could scarcely credit was by the same man. It looked more like a child's, stiff and upright, the letters pinched together.

Come and see me, for God's sake.

Even more distorted was the signature, the "M" squeezed in upon itself to convey an impression of fingers barely able to move, the "a" so wide open that it resembled a crude cup, the "r" nonexistent, and the rest — a line, kind of skidded down the card.

I simply did not know what to make of it. The erratic nature of the scrawl and the urgency of the words filled me with misgivings. Since Marcus and I were not fond of each other, his appeal seemed nothing short of desperate. That my brother should turn to *me*, someone he considered an insipid nonentity!

It had left me no choice but to cancel my business arrangements, and come.

At length the cab turned into an ugly road of terraced houses that I guessed was a fairly recent addition to Skelpton, since the red of its brickwork still held out against the grime, and the spearheads that topped its railings looked barbarously sharp and modern. I returned the card to my pocket and, as we drove along, amused myself by peering in at the rain-splashed windows, trying to guess what kind of person lived there. These houses were obviously not the homes of factory workers — they were much too grand, with tasseled curtains and potted plants; but railway officials and bank clerks, I thought, with a schoolmaster or two would fit in nicely, the respectable folk of Skelpton; and this led me to expect a turn into some much uglier street, a laborers' quarter, where Marcus would have taken up lodging to sit and sneer at the local gentility, when to my astonishment the cab rattled to a halt. The driver called, "Water Tower Street, didn't yer say? Number 36."

Feeling I had arrived much too soon, I clambered out with my bag and paid the fellow, whose cap, I couldn't help noticing, channeled rainwater down across his eyes in a great spout, but this inconvenience seemed not to bother him. In fact, he looked as if very little bothered him: his broad face seemed quite bloated with lethargy,

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and his humorless eyes, when he reached down for the money, resembled those nodules of lead I had used to weight a fishing line as a boy.

He took the fare and my generous tip without comment, snarled at his nag, then splashed away down the road, abandoning me.

And now my most immediate desire was to be out of the rain. I lost no time in giving a strong pull at the bell, and I heard it jangle in the hall. Soon a shape rose behind the door's opaque glass panel, and in the next moment I was looking at a lean, sharp-faced woman to whom I took an instant dislike. She appeared to move in sudden jerks and possessed slightly protuberant eyes that gave the strange impression of being many. I would hazard a guess that she was about fifty years of age. She wore her hair, which might have been auburn once, scraped back in a tight knot. Her voice was thin and unpleasant.

"Yes?"

She peered at me round the door's edge. Smells of luncheon — I could detect onions and watery kale — came wafting down the passageway behind her.

Despite the fact that she kept me out in the wet, I determined to be polite, and I paid her the courtesy of implying that Mrs. Brideson might employ a lady-companion or housekeeper, someone other than herself to answer the bell. Had I the honor of addressing Mrs. Brideson in person?

Her knuckles tightened on the door.

"What d'you want?" she said. "If you're another of those doctors, I've nothing more to say. You hear me?"

"Madam" — this time I spoke somewhat testily, for the rain was pelting on my back — "I've come to see my brother, Mr. Davies. Mr. Marcus Davies. He lodges here, I believe?"

At this information she became very still, only her eyes moving, scrutinizing my face, my attire, and finally coming to rest, I thought with some significance, on the bag I held. To hide my unease, I asked, "Is my brother in?"

The eyes came back to my face.

"His brother, you say? Well, you're too late. He's gone. Taken." — and she emphasized the words with peculiar satisfaction.

Gone. I was dumfounded. Picture me, confronted by this female, who clung to the side of the door like a human spider, while I stood in the rain with water pouring off my face, splashing off my shoes — picture me, brought to the place by an urgent summons, only to be told that Marcus had "gone."

I could do no more than splutter the word like a simpleton. "*Gone?*"

With one hand she opened the door wider, at the same time with the other hand drawing her grey shawl tighter round her shoulders.

"You had best come in. He's gone, and he owed me. There's a week's rent,

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and things I bought. Then there's the mess upstairs. I'll have to insist on compensation...."

I followed her into the front parlor, closing the house door as softly as I could behind me, though why I took such pains to make no noise would be difficult to say. It was as if I feared to disturb someone who lay upstairs.

The parlor was ice-cold and grey as the rest of Skelpton, depressing in the way of all unused rooms, smelling of dust and damp. Its soft-backed chairs had a mildewed look so that I felt sure they would be spongey to the touch, while its other furniture was dark and coffin-like, seemingly set apart from the ordinary business of life. Nevertheless, from a cheap bureau Mrs. Brideson drew out a red notebook that was clearly business of some sort. She started to flick through its pages. I stood by, exasperated.

"Mrs. Brideson ... where exactly *is* my brother?"

"Fourteen shillings — that's rent and board.... Two shillings and sixpense — that's for pens and ink.... Then the walls will need papering...."

She broke off, as if my question had taken time to penetrate these calculations, and regarded me with an expression of barely restrained hostility. Then, turning her back on me, she crossed the room and seated herself in one of the soft chairs, with the sole intent, I would say, of putting a greater distance between us.

"In the madhouse," she said. "They took him yesterday."

She watched me as a spider might watch a fly.

"I beg your pardon?"

—But I'd heard clearly enough. I sat down on the nearest thing to hand, which was an ironic, stiff-backed prayer-stool behind the door, and my mind became what I can best describe as granulated, forming fragments of questions, the beginnings of emotions, and completing none of them. The woman must have guessed I had heard, because she made no reply, and at last I think I asked, "Here? In Skelpton?"

"Just outside. It used to be the workhouse. Now it's the madhouse."

She pursed her lips in a self-congratulatory manner, and waited. Rain crawled in wrinkled shapes down the windows. I could think of nothing to say. In the end, perceiving this and perhaps forming an opinion that I wasn't the hysterical sort, Mrs. Brideson became more communicative.

"He had to go," she said firmly. "Your brother was sick, Mr. Davies—" and then, in case I had missed her meaning "—sick in the head." Her shoulders moved, a slight, curious twisting of her frame beneath the shawl. "Sounds up there," she said, "all hours, day and night. Not coming down for meals ... sending me out for ink like an errand boy ... I should have seen before that it wasn't natural.... but yesterday...."

Once more she pursed her lips, as if she hesitated, but after a few moments

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she began to speak rapidly.

"We were breakfasting in the kitchen, my daughter and me, when all of a sudden there's this crashing overhead — like chairs falling. Then a roar — a mad, angry roar. It gave Mary such a scare that she turned white as chalk. 'What was that?' she said. 'Nothing' I was going to say; the word was on the tip of my tongue, when we heard him come out onto the landing and start to bawl. So I said, 'You stay here and keep quiet!' Then I came out ... I went halfway up the stairs, and there he was...."

She broke off again; and by now, I think, she was relishing her narrative. Her dark dress had spread round her in the chair, and the red notebook rested in her lap like a live thing, like — it occurred to me for no reason — a benign parasite.

"There he was..." I prompted her.

"He was just standing there, sobbing like a babe, his hands up to his face. I called out and he cried, 'Don't look! Fetch help — a doctor!' Then he ran back into his room and locked the door."

Mrs. Brideson nodded soberly. "I fetched help right enough," she said. "I sent Mary for the constable. He and another police lad broke in. They took him away with no fuss, bar some scuffling on the path... but I wish they hadn't broke the lock," she added, "it was a good one. Being as you're a gentleman, Mr. Davies, I dare say you'll remember that in the compensation...."

"I'm afraid I don't understand."

She clutched the red notebook and stood up.

"The mess. Wait till you see it. You'll be wanting to see it, I suppose?"

"Oh, certainly —"

And so for a second time, I followed, leaving my bag by the prayer stool and traipsing after her, dazed, I would even say in a state of shock; for however little I loved my brother, I had never wished him any ill more terrible than a taste of poverty, just enough to teach him the merits of family life. Nor had I ever suspected Marcus of any fatal weakness or taint of mind. His eccentricities I remembered as perfectly consistent with his outlook; however bizarre his behavior, he had always been able to rationalize it according to his beliefs, (and they themselves were not so odd that they have not been voiced by others from time to time). Marcus in a madhouse! I was still struggling to give credence to the news as we went back into the hall.

There, a pale, sickly looking girl of perhaps twelve or thirteen was standing by what I took for the kitchen door, as the smell of kale had grown stronger with its opening. This child regarded me with large, frightened eyes.

"Get back to your dinner, Mary," said Mrs. Brideson without more than a single glance to her, "there's fruit on the side," — then she led the way upstairs.

We climbed, and I fancied the

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house grew darker, more oppressive as we left the hall below us. The impression still clung to me that someone lay resting in one of the bedrooms who would resent my intrusion. An invalid husband, perhaps? An aging parent?

"And your husband, ma'am?" I asked nervously, "what does he make of this — unfortunate business?"

"Mr. Brideson has passed on. There' just me and the girl." She looked back sharply across her shoulder. "That's why I'd be obliged for the compensation. It's hard on your own."

"Ah, quite...."

No one upstairs. The revelation affected me strangely: I became fearful not of what might happen, but of what had already happened. My legs became mysteriously weak and heavy, while my hand on the stair rail grew hot, sticking to the rail as if my palm had been coated with grease. It seemed plain to me now that the presence I felt in the house came from past events, from whatever horror had befallen my brother, lingering there still, though Marcus himself had gone.

This idea was so distressing that I began to be short of breath, and indeed I must have been panting quite audibly when, to my relief, the woman stopped. We had reached the second landing: before us stood a brown door. She nudged it, and it moved slightly. Its paintwork, I saw, was badly scratched where more than one heavy boot had kicked against it. Splinters of wood blossomed out of the door frame in the vicinity of the lock, unmistakable tokens of violence — and, oddly enough, these changed my mood for the better. I suddenly resolved that no matter what lay beyond that door I would behave like the man I had always been taken for — practical, and unimaginative.

Mrs. Brideson stood aside, twisting her mouth to express God knows what inner conflict. She said scathingly, "Go on in, Mr. Davies. See for yourself. I've touched nothing since they took him."

I met her challenge almost without flinching.

The curtains were drawn together, so that at first gloom obscured everything and I was chiefly conscious of the stench — stale, sweaty bed-linen — but within seconds I perceived the disorder, the bed things all tumbled, a chair upturned on the floor, a desk littered with papers.... Then my eyes grew wiser, and I think I gave some sort of exclamation. Hurrying over to the windows I tore the curtains back, hoping more light would prove what I had seen in an illusion, but instead, the bleak Skelpton day confirmed it as the reality.

Ink! The walls were spattered with it. Purples, black, vivid reds ... bursts of ink everywhere! And not only the walls, but also on the curtains, the carpet, the papers cluttering the desk, as if bottles of the stuff had literally been thrown against whatever surface was nearest.

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Some of these splashes formed hapes like large chrysanthemums, vhereas others were smudged, as hough something — a board or a ook — had been brought down on hem and scraped along. Even more nysterious, in places the walls were itted, as if inky points had been lriven through the paper, while in the eather top of the desk and the wooden ack of the blotting pad, I noticed ther, smaller holes, all of them dark vith ink.

Then the books. Some two dozen f them lay scattered about on the loor, their pages ripped or bent back, he covers ink-stained. I could only onclude that Marcus had removed hem from the bookcase in a fit of nger, emptied penloads of ink onto ach, then thrown them around the oom.

Other disturbing features: beside he desk, a tall wicker waste-paper asket had fallen over into its side, pilling a heap of empty ink bottles out nto the carpet; and on the desk itself, n assortment of nibs and pens all bent nd twisted lay strewn among the lit- er.

Signs of derangement? I confess, lespite my resolve to face all dis- overies with calmness, I had not ex- ected such strong evidence. For want f other means to express my dismay, I urned over the papers, reading here a vord, there a phrase; and though nany of these papers were written in a ramped or irregular hand, in some I could recognize the old, assertive style of Marcus. The content, so far as I could tell, was fiction, some uncouth speech that I took for an exercise in the local dialect, and this illustration of my brother's struggle to work touched me deeply. I wanted to read more, to understand, but page after page — I saw they were all fragments.... Even on the best there were never more than five or six lines before the letters changed character and the writing deteriorated, either sloping down the page as if some unseen pressure had been applied to the pen, or closing up tight and desperate, as if the writer had labored against such a force. I thought of the writing on the card in my pocket, and saw that it was at home among this wreckage.

Laudanum? Alcohol? What destructive force had been at work here? While I was taxing my brain with this riddle, Mrs. Brideson came stealthily into the room behind me. I started when her arm — the skin transparent as gelatin — stretched out at my side to pick up papers from the desk. She peered at one or two suspciciously.

"A clever man, was he? Your brother?"

As if he were dead.

"In his way."

Disliking her proximity, I edged round the desk, ostensibly to examine the handsome wooden inkstand. It was amply coated with ink, and one half of it, in which a glass inkwell was set, looked velvety black from its many soakings.

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I remarked stupidly.

"He's always been in too much of a hurry. Always spilling things," — an observation which, considering the state of the room, bordered on the comic. Immediately I regretted it. I was embarrassed, and lifting the inkwell's pewter lid, I let it fall again with a dull clank. This moment of fidget left a black smudge on my finger.

The woman grunted.

"You see what a mess it is — and have you looked at this? The linen ruined."

She had crossed to the bed and lifted one of the sheets by a corner so that I could examine the ink-stains as well as other rust-colored marks which I had not noticed before.

"Blood?"

"He was no pretty sight when they took him, I'll not say more than that — Have you seen enough?"

"Yes."

Blood... and yet at the time, my mind refused to take the word seriously. It already had enough to worry about. Trivial though it may seem, I was extremely bothered by the matter of compensation: it seemed a point of honor.

We went down again to the parlor, where I took five soverigns from my wallet and laid them in the woman's hand.

"I trust that will be sufficient?"

"I imagine."

Without a word of thanks she locked the money away in her dark bureau, turning the key most particularly, and pocketing it. Then she said:

"You'll be going to see him, I suppose, now that you've come. You can stop here tonight and pack his things."

These were instructions, not questions. And I dare say I looked in need of directing as I stood there, awkwardly in my overcoat, I hesitated. I did not warm to the idea of Mrs. Brideson's hospitality, and yet I could think of no sounder plan. It made sense to sleep for one night beneath her roof, for, of course, she was right: I would have to sort my brother's things, just as if he were truly dead.

"Well, if that's...."

"No trouble."

She jerked up her head with something like triumph. Very likely she had not relished the prospect of clearing my brother's debris herself.

"We've another room, quite comfortable."

Thank you, ... and this ... establishment...."

"You mean the madhouse?"

Her thin voice gloried in the word. Even with the compensation settled she was manifestly sour with resentment — but I suppose I should not blame her for that. To find one's lodger, so quiet and learned-seeming, is in fact a lunatic, might well give anyone a deep sense of injury. It was unpleasant, but could understand: the relatives of mad men are not forgiven easily. Oh, how she reveled in my predicament!

"Walk out to it," she advised, with

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small, pleased nods. "That's what I'd do, unless you want your name in the newspaper. A gentleman from the South, visiting the madhouse.... Two miles out on the Mill Road. It won't take you long," and she pulled her shawl tighter round her, as if to remind me how wet and bleak the day was.

So I walked. And why expound on the miseries of that walk? I've written enough about the charms of Skelpton already. Suffice it to say that the black rain continued to fall in torrents until the gutters overflowed, and I was soaked to the bone. But my mental condition, you may be sure, was far more wretched than my physical. While terraced streets gave way to alleys, and houses to factory walls, I walked in a stupor of revulsion and despair. My own brother in a madhouse! Myself visiting such a place! Think it monstrous if you will, but I was so overwhelmed by the horror of these circumstances that even then, with the first shock abated, it was only for random moments that I felt any true concern for Marcus. I was too much preoccupied forcing myself to move forwards. I had an urgent desire to abandon my brother, forfeit my belongings at Water Tower Street, and scamper back to the railway station to catch the first train South.

Believe me, this was a severe temptation, and it reached its crisis point at my first glimpse of the asylum.

On both sides of the road I followed there had been factory yards, but after some time these gave up their companionship to expose me to the open hillside — derelict land, strewn with garbage and pocked with mud — looking out across which I saw, slightly distorted by the rain, a vast grey edifice. Tall and boxlike, it rose beside the road a good distance yet ahead of me, and I was terrified. Why, I cannot explain; it is, in any case, wiser not to try, since experts assure us that the thoughts by which we link things are never those we suppose. However that may be, at my first glimpse of the asylum I stopped, paralyzed with fright; the building put me in mind of a certain reverend gentleman who had taught me Latin grammar in my boyhood, a stern, highly virtuous person, who had always dressed in black and smelled of soap. Ah, but he was of all things the most horrible! Whenever my memory had failed me in conjugating a verb or the declension of a noun, he had let fall from his upper jaw a plate of dentures — long, yellow teeth; and this had been the terror of my early days. It had brought together in my blood all the ingredients of shock, disgust, fright and fascination, and never since had I experienced such a union of these emotions until I saw the asylum.

To encourage myself to go forward, I had to pull out the card from my pocket:

Come and see me, for God's sake. Marcus.

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I stared at those desperate words until the rain blurred them, making the ink run down in pale streaks onto my hand.

Mercifully, Skelpton Mental Asylum is at least no more terrible on the inside — not where the visitor walks — than it is without. My frantic holloaing at the gate brought forth a perfectly bright-eyed porter skipping across the yard with an apron pulled over his head as protection against the rain. Through a grille in the gate I watched him advance. Did he look mad? Was this some trusted inmate? I waited nervously while he drew the bolts and poked out a red-veined face at me. He looked too hearty to be a Skelpton man.

"Sorry t'keep yer waitin', sir," he grinned. Then, looking me over, he exclaimed, "my, but yer wet! Though, beggin' yer pardon, sir, but yer should ha' pulled t'bell."

I had been in too great a fright to see it, the heavy brass ring set in the wall.

"Business, sir?"

"I wish to see... to enquire about... a relative. A cousin. He was brought here yesterday."

"Better come an' see t' guviner."

The gate thudded behind us. Bolts closed off the world. I followed my jovial guide across the yard, and I shall not easily forget the patter of rain on the flagstones, nor the chuckling sounds it made in the gutters, for the yard seemed interminable. It gleamed, silvery-grey, and looking up between the high walls with their barred windows at a patch of sky that fitted over the asylum like a lid, I found it difficult to believe I had not fallen into some deep pit. The state of my nerves, no doubt, exaggerated the height of the building.

Looking up was, indeed, a mistake, because I saw, peering out through the bars of one window a face, very thin and white, and though it was too high up for me to distinguish its features, this face brought me to a halt, held me, as a snake is said to mesmerize its victims.

The porter came scuttling back through the downpour.

"Come along, sir... No point gettin' wetter than we have ter...."

He took the liberty of plucking at my sleeve, and that, besides his reasonable tone, ended the spell, and I was free to move again.

Long, cold corridors, morbidly silent, and yet, I thought, strangely crowded with muffled sounds; the walls, painted to shoulder-height a pale green that glistened nauseously at the corridor junctions, where gas lamps hung suspended from the ceiling; rows of closed doors, each bearing a number; flights of stone steps; long, wooden benches.

"You wait here, sir," said the porter at length, "an' I'll tell 'em yer come. What name was it, sir?"

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"My name is Davies... and the patient's name is Marcus Davies."

Then, panicked by the thought that the fellow might abandon me without a word to anyone, I offered him a shilling. He took it with a wink.

"Thankin' you, sir, Don't you worry...."

He disappeared round a corner.

It seemed a long wait. I opened my coat and shook off the rain that had not yet soaked into the fabric. I longed to wring the water from my trouser legs as well, and even thought of pulling off a boot to examine the state of my feet — but of course that was out of the question: anyone might come, and if they did, why, even more than in the interests of decorum I wished to be fully clothed so that I might leap up and run at a moment's notice.

And I almost did run, when round the corner from the direction the porter had taken appeared a great bear of a man — I heard him coming before I saw him: heavy footsteps and a jangling that in my fright I took for the music of broken chains but which turned out to signify the keys he wore at his belt. Also at his belt hung a kind of truncheon. I suppose he was a warden, though to me he looked more like a jailer from Hell, his face black with stubble, and his shirt sleeves rolled up to display muscular arms that were matted with dark hairs.

Stopping a few paces from the bench, this horror ignored my feeble smile and appraised me with a surly eye. Presently he asked, "Bin attended ter, are yer?" I assured him that I was, and he shambled on.

But I began to despair of my porter. I counted the minutes circumnavigating my watch. Four, five of them passed, and finally, to dispel my alarm, I coughed — just to prove how much at ease I felt in the place. For this bravado I repented at leisure: my cough prowled up and down the corridor like a specter, lingering on the very edge of my senses for an uncomfortable length of time. I began to shiver; in fact I was bathed in cold perspiration when at last I heard the sound of more footsteps. This time they were brisk, even cheerful, and round the corner came a young man with a pink face and a civilized smile. His mustache was beautifully curled.

"Mr. Davies?" He had a bright, pleasing voice — "I'm Dr. Forster's assistant. He will see you now. Would you be so good...?"

I was already on my feet; and with the utmost politeness he conducted me down the corridor.

II

August 18th

This place will do. The woman cooks abominably and is about as interesting as a cake of chalk. I've given orders for meals to be left outside my door on a tray so that I'll not be tied to her routine and will be spared her company. Besides the widow there is only her daughter, a mouse of a thing, about thirteen, who runs away when-

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ever we meet on the stairs.

No more family commitment! Freedom. I feel I will write great things here. From my window I look out onto factory chimnies and black roofs. I've turned the desk round, so that when I'm at work this view will inspire me.

Objective: a novel without hypocrisy: no picturesque settings, no heroine all honey sweetness, no terrific hero.... To show that the misery of life lies in its dullness, how unsensational everything is, even the so-called scandalous or horrific elements, to convey this by using "shocking" material in such a way that it fails to shock.

August 26th

I've made a start. It's going well. The words come tumbling out. I brew coffee to a thick syrup on the gas ring by my bed and drink it when my brain flags. It tastes unspeakably vile — and so it should, it's poison, no less — but how it makes the ideas dance!

Mostly I'm working at night, beginning about 5 in the evening and carrying on till dawn. Then I sleep until midday. The Brideson woman leaves a breakfast tray of bread and butter at my door before she goes to bed, so this system works pretty well. I eat breakfast before I sleep and wake up to lunch.

Sometimes in the afternoon I stroll through the alleys and factory yards listening to the workers cursing, or I try to penetrate those hard, uninterested looks on their faces. Sometimes I walk out along the Mill Road to look at the mess — the unchronicled, haphazard ruin of an English hillside. And sometimes I explore the hovels of the very poor, who have no occupation and live on their wits like curs.

A number of prostitutes congregate at one of Skelpton's beer halls, some of them quite attractive in a predatory way, but I'll not meddle! Talk with them, certainly, to learn how jaded and bored they are, but lie with them, never.

Because I must let nothing distract me. Besides, I already know the lessons their bodies teach, and now it's the other sort of deprivation I have to learn: suppression of appetite. I must have experienced both excess and its opposite if I am to write this book convincingly.

August 28th

Curse and blast my family with their precious education! Chapter Two: I'm writing about a drunkard, a wife beater. I am describing his thoughts as he staggers home one night full of drink — and how does it come out? Ridiculous! Great rolling Latin phrases, beautifully sustained periods, choice reflections! Like a carnival float squeezing down a back street.

This so-called "culture," this gift that brother Robert used to say we should thank God and His saints for, will end by suffocating me! It's like a skin that needs flaying off. It taints every part of my life that it touches.

Witness — for God's sake — my

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ast entry. Those prostitutes: "a umber ... congregate at one of kelpton's beer halls, some of them uite attractive in a predatory way, ut I'll not meddle...." What a pious ld lecher I sound! But how to avoid ? How not to sound like a hypocrite hen I've been taught the language of yprocrisy, with all its euphemisms nd double standards?

I see I have my work cut out, just ndoing my parents' education.

Problem is — the coffee I drink. hough it sharpens my ideas, it mars ny sleep so that I feel tired and am asily disheartened. Still, I would not villingly do without it. There are times the night after a cup of that poison hen I think so clearly, see things with uch perspicacity, that I'm brimming ver with happiness! I don't even care hat there's no one with whom I can hare my thoughts. At such moments I ecome astonishingly patient. Ah, let hem wait, I tell myself, time will bear ie out! They will read this one day, nd *see*....

I am working a steady twelve hours day.

eptember 1st

he rewrite on Chapter 2 is good. Or t least it is better. I am improving. My ntences are shorter, colder; my vords, blunter. I am becoming so absorbed in my characters that going out ow seems a chore. So I have stocked p with ink and nibs. Mrs. Brideson elivers food to my door like clockvork, and I'm settling into the toil of writing without any distractions. There are no external events to record.

Correction: there is one. The girl, Mary, seems to have lost her fear of me. Now she's simply fascinated, as she would be of a pet ogre or dwarf.

Last evening as I came from the bathroom I found her on the landing dressed only in a cotton nightshirt, her feet bare, and her hair loose on her shoulders. The sight startled me. Why? Well, I won't say she's pretty — she's too much of a ghost for that — but her body is more developed than those little girl clothes would have one believe. Then again, at the mere sight of me I thought she would scamper off as usual, but, on the contrary, she stood just where she was (in my way, as it happened, so that I was obliged to step round her), simpering and rubbing her hands on the sides of her shirt.

September 3rd

It's going well. Difficult to bring myself to stop even for a pretense of sleep. My dreams, when I do sleep, are full of memories of childhood: Robert, chubbily virtuous, the darling of visiting aunts; myself being punished — shut in dark cupboards for using my Bible as a makeshift hammer, or sent to bed on a whipping for inking fangs onto the portraits in the hall. There are other dreams, of voluptuous women with heavy breasts and creased, blue-veined thighs. Awake, I think of these creatures as revolting, but in my dreams they come to me like goddesses, promising all manner of delight.

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I am discovering for myself how savagely the flesh fights back when you restrain it all day in some sedentary occupation. Given half a chance, it would dictate to me.

"Lie down awhile," it whispers, "and give pleasure to yourself, since you're too fastidious for the Skelpton tarts." Then it adds in a vicious undertone, "Hypocrite!"

I drink coffee and write. The energy is better channeled into work. For the book's sake, haven't I said that I must learn what they're like, these basic deprivations?

I've finished Chapter 3. I'm amazed by my pace, terrified that suddenly there will be nothing left to say, and the pen will falter. To stave off this fear, I play a game.

There is a shallow inkwell set in an ornamental stand on the desk, and every night I fill it from the ink bottle, saying to myself:

"I will not go to sleep until this is empty."

Then I set to work.

A peculiar ritual. Can't think why it helps.

September 6th

Chapter 4. The son of my drunkard has left for the city to become a swell. I keep putting dry, sarcastic speeches into his mouth, but it's too soon. He wouldn't have the detachment, nor the style. Will have to rewrite this.

September 8th

Stuck on Chapter 4. Went for a walk yesterday, but it didn't help. Came back and masturbated. Slept a blacl cloying sleep. Failure.

September 9th

An interesting symptom of overwor Chapter 4 has begun to move, creak ly, but with hopes of gaining strengt so to help matters along, I drank good inch of distilled coffee, and b one o'clock this morning my pen wa fairly skating across the paper. I grev hot and stopped to wipe my brow o my sleeve, when a curious thing hap pened. I'll describe it exactly as it wa seeing as it's nonsense anyway, th quirk of a tired brain.

The lid of the inkwell stood open as it usually does when I'm at work and I found myself staring at it, think ing of the next words to be set down when the lid trembled slightly, indee so slightly that I thought nothing of i yet neither did I carry on with m work: I watched. The pool of black in also seemed to be trembling, coagula ing....

Suddenly something flimsy an long-limbed started to separate fro the liquid and clamber out over th inkwell's side. At first I thought it mu be an insect, a fly or spider that ha fallen into the ink and was making valiant attempt to save itself. Yet mor honestly, I believe I never reall thought that. I knew this was som thing quite different, special, with pa ticular significance for myself.

The thing was bluish-black, move in flickers, and was as tall as my mid dle finger. It was naked, and so far as

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could see, perfectly formed with all the parts of a man, only so lean and tenuous that it seemed no more substantial than a stick-figure drawn with a thick nib.

With something of an effort this creature heaved itself on to the edge of the inkwell, and regained its balance, dangling its legs over the side. Then it looked at me.

In its dark face, red eyes; and when it smiled, the tip of a red tongue. The smile I couldn't interpret, though in retrospect I'd compare it to a street urchin's — chirpy enough, but capable of hiding malice. Maybe a thief's smile.

I felt no fear. Neither did I rush out of the room, crying for Mrs. Brideson to fetch a doctor. Instead, stretching out my pen, I endeavored to poke the manikin very gently, to discover whether it had substance; but he moved too quickly for me. He slid along the shaft of my pen like a child sliding down a bannister until he reached my fingers. Then, springing nimbly to his feet, he ran back up the shaft onto the rims of the inkwell, and from there he put out his tongue at me before slipping down once more into the ink.

What to make of this? I mean, the significance? Compare angels stirring the pool at Bethesda in the New Testament, the sick and crippled waiting for cure. Could that be the genesis of my imp?

I must sleep more. It's madness to ignore such warnings as this.

September 10th

No imps today! I took a brisk walk down the Mill Road, well past the madhouse. On the way back, I stopped to talk to the girls at the beer hall. One of them, Essie, might take my fancy if it weren't for the book. But I won't give in.

Worked tonight without one sip of coffee.

September 12th

Have abandoned Chapter 4 and shall go back to it later. Intend to brew coffee again tonight. It's no use. The ideas hold back without it.

September 13th

The imp is back. He came out last night to sit cross-legged on the desk like a tailor. In fact, I didn't notice him arrive. One moment, a blank sheet of scrap paper by my elbow: the next, he was there, sitting in the middle of it, grinning away with that red tongue he so likes to exhibit. Knowing he's an hallucination, I did my best to ignore him, and he gave me no trouble, sat very still. Whenever I looked at him, he grinned; otherwise, nothing. I think he means to be friends. He disappeared again without my noticing.

Oddly enough, Chapter 5 is going well: a description of the woman' life, the wife of a drunkard, a drab, hopeless existence, punctuated by moments of violence. It needed careful treatment — facile pathos would have ruined it — but I think I've succeeded: her sufferings are tedious in the extreme, full of grey predictability.

The irony, though! To write this

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chapter on the dullness of life with such ease, while I have this bizarre adventure in my head! But I must not glamourize the matter. The imp, too, is nothing. Nothing at all.

September 15th

Couldn't sleep. Can't write. Ventured downstairs to ask Mrs. Brideson for more bread, and found the girl alone in the kitchen. She was stirring a mess of flour in a bowl, and became afflicted by giggles when I came in. More bread? Certainly. She cut me a thick slice from the loaf, and I meant to chuck her under the chin for the service, but, startled, she jerked aside, so that my hand brushed against her breast.

I came away with the absurd idea that she would not have protested if my hand had stayed there.

Obviously I'm overtired. Must try to relax more, read.

September 16th

He came out while I was reading, the devil! It took no brew to conjure him up this time. I knew he was present before I looked. I forced myself to read to the end of the page before turning my head, and — voila! — perched on the pile of my manuscript, sticking out that red tongue! The impudence! He waved cheerfully, got to his feet, and started prancing about over my carefully written last page. It was provocation, friendly — but annoying.

"Damn you," I said, "I'll prove you don't exist!" and flinging down the book, I went over to the desk to make a grab at him. I thought — If I can only touch him and feel it's air I'm touching, that will be an end to the matter....

But he evaded me, capering from inkstand to blotting pad, then back to the manuscript, while my hand came down slam, slam, just an inch behind him, like a fussy clerk trying to swat a fly. And all the time, though I could hear nothing, I could see that he was laughing, his bluish face creased up merrily. He's a great acrobat. There were somersaults and Herculean leaps for my entertainment. Oh, it was rare fun! Down fell the manuscript, scattering on the carpet; the blotting pad rocked like a cradle. Round and round the desk we went, until it became quite evident that I couldn't catch him without his connivance. So finally I shrugged, retreated a couple of paces and said, "Imp, you win! I only wanted to touch you, to prove you're real."

He leaned against the inkstand, panting. I could see his meager black chest heaving in and out. His red eyes blazed at me. Then, all at once, he stretched out a hand; it was long, with excessively pointed fingers, and out of proportion with the rest of his body. He seemed to beckon me.

"Is this an invitation?"

He nodded. I stepped forward. The imp remained backed up against the inkstand, watching.

"May I touch you?"

My voice was full of mockery. I'm not so ill but it seems comic to ask per-

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mission of an hallucination.

Again he nodded. Slowly I put out a finger and brushed it lightly against his chest. I expected to feel only the wood of the inkstand, but in this I was mistaken. He was cold and wet as ink itself. I rubbed my finger along his side and felt his ribs. I stroked his lean thighs and felt him tense his muscles at the sensation. All the while, he never took his eyes from my face, and he smiled, his lips apart to show scarlet gums. My imp, it seems, is a creature of sensual pleasure; he submitted to my exploration with every sign of enjoyment.

—Well — I thought — this isn't the way to prove I imagine him —

On the contrary, the finger with which I stroked him felt chilled through, as if it were in contact with something at least as tangible as ice. So I withdrew it. What to do? He waited, then made an agitated movement. More! He wanted more!

So he has great appetites in that thread-like body. The answer then must be to ignore him.

Deliberately I went back to my book, and made a great effort not to look at the desk again; but once or twice I could not resist, and whenever I looked, I found him sitting on the very edge of the desk, his knees drawn up to his chin, watching me with an expression of intense annoyance.

I pretended to read. What to do? Should I visit a doctor? But any treatment a doctor prescribes is sure to involve breaking off the novel. He will send me on a rest cure or fill me with sleeping draughts. No. If I don't want my work interrupted, I shall have to fight this demon myself.

At last dawn showed at the window, and my eyes grew so heavy that I longed to go to bed; but this presented a difficulty: when I laid down the book and stood up, what if he should still be there, watching me from the desk? Go to bed and ignore him, I resolved.

Fortunately, this time he had gone.

So I came and lay down, utterly exhausted, but I can't sleep. Despite myself, I'm alert, waiting for him to appear again. To try to calm myself, I've written all this down. Luckily the journal was beside my bed, and rather than risk a trip to the desk, I've written with this lead pencil, which I keep with a pad beneath my pillow for jottings when I wake suddenly with an idea.

Perhaps I should simply accept this visitor and show no concern about him. That way, very likely he will soon fade back into my brain.

September 18th

Last night the imp made a late appearance. I was so absorbed in my work, that I had almost forgotten him. Chapter 5 is completed, and now in Chapter 6 I am flinging my drunkard out of his job. In this chapter the character reaches new depths of despair and degradation. I think it will do. My language has coarsened wonderfully. I drag the fellow through every kind of squalor without any of it read-

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ing in the least strange or exotic, and that's exactly what I intended. If only I can keep this up!

True to my resolve, I ignored the imp, treatment which didn't please him. He pattered about over the scrap paper, and then, when this failed to distract me, executed smart cartwheels down the margin of the page I was writing. Even then, I pretended not to see, though from a quick glance I knew very well that his grin had given way to a scowl. The damn thing wanted attention! I went on writing, and sweated. How to rid myself of this phantom? I can't express how badly I wanted to concentrate on my chapter — and in fact I might have succeeded, only several things happened. For one, there was a sound, the first I've heard from the imp's lips, a short, high-pitched squeak, something like a baby rat's. It took me so much by surprise that I stopped writing and stared round at him. He was standing, black arms akimbo, on the desk by my left wrist, those red eyes of his very fiery, his face distorted with anger.

"What is it?" I asked.

He squeaked again and made a beckoning gesture.

"You want me to stroke you, is that it?"

Grins and nods. He lay down obligingly, full length.

But I said, "I've got work to do," and started to write again, though not surprisingly the sentence I put down was rubbish. Suddenly, another squeak, and then — a most amazing thing: my pen skidded down the page in a wild zigzag. The wretch! He had leapt across in front of my eyes, caught hold of the pen, and now he swung on it, his spindly legs moving together, backwards and forwards....

I slammed the pen down hard, hoping to trap him beneath it — but no luck! He slithered aside with the fluidity of ink and gave me a look of absolute fury. Then he cast his eyes about for an instrument, a weapon....

By this time, of course, my concentration had quite gone. So I gave up the struggle to write and watched him. He climbed up the inkstand to a ridge on which I keep a penknife, a few pins and clips, spare nibs; and clambering about among this ironmongery, he appeared to be making a selection.

Now it was my turn to grin.

"Don't be a fool!" I mocked him, "a sprat like you could never lift anything that size!"

He was struggling with a good stout nib, the sort we used for italics. My scorn was torture to him. There were more squeaks, and he broke off his labors to shake a fist at me.

"Bravo!" I applauded, "bravo!"

That did it! Frantic with rage, he grabbed hold of a pin, clutched it like a spear, and thus armed, came bounding down onto the sheet of paper I had just covered with writing.

It's hugely comic, I dare say, but never has a pin seemed so terrible to me. He raised it, a pygmy on a hunt,

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aiming it soberly at a point between my eyes, while I sat frozen. I had not thought there could be enough strength in him to raise any object. Such careful deadly aim he took, his tongue wetting his lips as he concentrated... then, quite abruptly, with a shriek he flung the pin point-downwards into the sheet of paper and dragged at it until the paper ripped, my bright new sentences splitting in two, separating in opposite directions.

My God, if he does that again...!

I let out a roar and brought my fist down on his head with a thud — but he had dodged me! Stab, stab went the pin in my fingers, like wasp stings. I was too amazed to pull my hand back. At last I cried out:

"Pax! Very well!"

—and the stabbing ceased. I nursed my sore hand, scouted the desk. Where was he? Why, there, the dark victor, lying full length on the wooden back of the blotting pad, a grin like a half-moon stretching his face. He beckoned me, and I stroked him, along his ribs, across his abdomen and testicles, while he grinned and grinned.

Some five minutes passed, after which he rose, and gave me an ironic bow, before submerging himself in the inkwell.

I closed the lid and placed a paper weight on top of it. Then I fell asleep in the chair.

Today, Mrs. Brideson knocked on my door to enquire whether I had slept well. Had I not suffered bad dreams? Yes, yes, I said. Her thin, querulous voice is loathsome to me. Why can't she say what she means? Her cold eyes imply that a day's hard labor would cure me of dreams.

I keep staring at the puncture marks on my hand. Did I inflict them upon myself? If so, I am well and truly mad. But the cause is simple: isolation, that's all it is, and so the remedy might also be simple. If I had the company of someone practical and unimaginative, a champion of mediocrity, perhaps all this effervescence of my mind would evaporate? Summon brother Robert. Maybe it's worth a try.

September 21st

He has me like a eunuch, the wretch! Somehow he keeps pushing off the paper weight that holds the lid down. (No! I won't believe I lift it off myself). He comes out and demands his pleasure. I stroke him till he wearies of it. If I refuse, he waits till I start to write, then leans up against the pen nib so that I can barely push the words out, or else he pulls on the shaft to make the whole illegible. Another game: he sits on the inkwell's rim and flicks ink down onto the page from his fingers.

So I humor him, and afterwards for a while he'll sit quietly, until he grows bored. Then he explores, the desk or climbs onto my sleeve and scales my arm to crawl about on my neck. He digs his sharp fingernails into my skin and flattens his body against my cheek, wet and cold. It's revolting. I

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daren't go out in case he's hiding on me when I go. I should lose whatever's left of my wits if he clambered over my mouth somewhere in the street. Maybe no one would see him except myself, no matter: to be mad in public is a confirmation that one is lost, wereas to be mad in private is no more than we all are sometimes.

He consumes ink at an extraordinary rate. I no longer fill the inkwell, but he thieves it out of the bottles. Maybe he drinks it. Maybe he's made of it and has to renew himself daily. A good deal of it he wastes in spills over my papers when I annoy him. I now keep my manuscript locked in the bedside cabinet. The penknife is there, too.

Much against my inky friend's will, I've written to Robert. But how to post my card, since I daren't go out? (Yes, a card: I kept the appeal dramatic and mysterious. Nothing else would bring my brother to me).

September 22nd

We've had a fight! Tonight I lost patience and refused to stroke him. So he retaliated by tearing up every page I began to write. I moved across to the sofa, rested a sheet of paper on a book, and tried to forget him. But the devil had stolen a ride in my pocket! I was no sooner settled than he leapt out, opened his mouth, and spewed ink, thick black ink, onto the book — a precious copy of Engels.

Oh, he was enormously angry that I'd tried to escape! He pranced up and down on the back of Engels in the slimy puddle he'd made, squeaking magnificently. I'm sure he's gaining voice ... those squeaks grow louder by the day. The spoilt pest! I laid Engels down very gently and, reaching behind me to the bookcase, brought out a good, solid Macaulay. Slam! Down with it, into the inky mess! But I missed; always, always I miss. I saw him, the fiend, scampering away across the carpet, and I took leave of my senses. Book after book I flung at him, while he dodged and weaved his way about, now stopping to pull a mocking face at me, now twisting back to rip a page from one book, or spit ink across the spine of another; and still, stupidly, I bombarded him with book after book. The more of them he ruined, the more I threw, till tiring of his sport, he ran (with such speed!) to the wall and started to scale it, swinging across the curtains and onto the next wall, all the time spewing ink in great blotches.

I had to do something, so I rushed to the desk and grabbed my pen: then I chased him, endeavoring to pin him to the wall with one thrust of the nib — but still he defeated me. He would freeze until I had crept up close, and then, one twitch, and he was a foot or so away. It was horrible ... like a tailess lizard, his belly flattened to the wall, clinging with his nails ... or maybe he can *stick* to a surface ... I cannot tell, I only know that he uses his nails on *me*.

In the end, I flung aside the pen and

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tried to swat him with a sheaf of papers. No use: he's much too quick. I gave up; and now, here I sit wretchedly on the edge of my bed, penciling these notes. To my relief, in the last minute he's disappeared, my tormentor — hiding, no doubt, to recuperate.

I must trap him somehow. I have to be rid of him! he's driving me mad.

One spot of brightness today: when I heard the lunch tray being set down, I opened the door — and it was the girl, Mary. I begged her to post the card. At first she backed away; she appeared confused, as if it were not quite decent that I should know she now brings up my meals instead of her mother; or else maybe she saw something strange in me. I spoke softly.

"You're not scared of me, surely, are you?"

She stood against the stair rail, a mouse about to scamper, while I smiled so desperately that it hurt. The card *had* to be posted! At last, I suppose, my smile won. Creeping forward, she took the card in her damp fingers, and as she did so, overwhelmed with relief, I kissed her head, just where the hair parts in a white line. She ran off down the stairs. I felt exhilarated. It was then that I made up my mind to resist the imp tonight.

I only just had the presence of mind to call after Mary that I need more ink, and if she or her mother would fetch it, I'd settle with the rent. He has consumed two whole bottles since noon yesterday.

September 24th

I have him! At last I have him! He is stretched out on the flat wooden back of the blotter, *pinned* down. Oh, yes, barbaric of me, no doubt, but there seems no other way, and, after all, it's not as if he were flesh and blood, for all his squeaks and squeals. And if I had merely trapped him under a cup, he might have slithered out beneath the rim ... he has so many of the properties of ink. No. Pinning it had to be. I have him by one through each shoulder, one in the left leg, and one in the right arm, at the elbow. This unorthodox arrangement avods any unpleasant analogies with crucifixion. I mean, I've deliberately pinned him down in a unique pattern to remind myself that, let him squeal all he likes, there is nothing here that is tragic or metaphysical. I am simply ridding my mind of an obsession.

Perhaps in time I shall have to add another pin through the right leg, in case by tossing about he works loose; but so far he lies quite feeble, squeaking, his red eyes rolling in what he would have me take for agony, and his mouth open so wide that I can examine at leisure not only his scarlet gums and tongue, but also a set of black, pointed teeth that form a circle round the opening to his throat. Fascinating.

Pinning him down is only a temporary measure. He must be finished with. I've thought of burning the blotter and him together, but the weather is so mild that I have no fire in my

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room, and to carry the thing down to the kitchen stove seems another of those confirmations of madness.

But how else to be rid of a creature that can live even submerged in ink? I have in mind an experiment. I shall *fade* him out! I am going to cover him with blotting paper and hope that its absorptive powers, combined with ink-starvation, will make an end of him.

Oh, it's so good to sit at this desk again, dipping the pen and writing without his despicable interference.

Squeak on, you little wretch! Kick your one free leg at me! My God, the look of venom on his face! Why, it's nothing, nothing my fine fellow. Soon you'll not even exist to this extent — which is not at all, not by one twinge of your miserable body!

In the end, catching him proved simple. When he came out and threw himself against the nib to attract my attention, I smiled, laid the pen aside, and said:

"Peace. I'm in no mood for another fight. Can't you see, I haven't found the strength yet to clear up after our last one? Why can't we be friends and entertain each other? What would you like?"

Like? To be stroked and caressed, of course! Down he lay invitingly on the back of the blotter, and I flattered him with my most patient attention, until his tongue moved across his lips in ecstasy and his eyes almost closed. Never had I been so obliging.

"Do you like that?" I asked. "You like that?"

He grinned up at me, with eyes no more than slits. I continued to stroke ... and his eyes closed.

In went the pins, one simultaneously into each shoulder. I had one concealed at the ready in my left hand and one was pressed between thumb and index finger of my right; the imp hadn't noticed that against all precedent I used my middle finger for stroking him.

No sooner had the pins penetrated than his eyes opened like poppies, full of pained amazement. He began to howl and struggled to rise, but I was already at work on the right elbow, squeezing my pin home into the soft wood.

Clamping down the left leg took some time longer, for he kicked at first, and so hard that tiny white spots appeared in the wood where he scuffed it.

Now I have him! I shall lay the blotting paper over him and sleep well tonight. Tomorrow, or the day after, will bring brother Robert, all solicitous from the bosom of the family; and I'll laugh and say, "Wrong? Nothing wrong! Just a way of getting you up here, old son! Time we had a drink *together*!"

That will outrage him completely. "To bring me all this way for nothing!" — I can almost hear him sputtering it as I write!

III

You would be distressed," said Dr.

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Forster mildly, "were you to see your brother. Allow me to suggest, sir, that for the present you do not. Leave him to our care, our absolute care.... Later, when his injuries have healed, perhaps...." He paused to smile reflectively.

"Injuries?"

I remember the woman holding up a blood-stained sheet, but only at this instant, in the quiet, primrose room of Dr. Forster, did I fully realize that Marcus was hurt. To the consternation of the doctor's assistant, though not, I think, to his own, I rose at once from my chair, crying, "But of course I must see him! Of course!"

"Pray, calm yourself, sir," said the younger man, moving with alacrity to stand between me and the door.

Dr. Forster smiled.

"To what end?" he asked. "We have given him a sleeping draught. The wretched man was in the last straits of exhaustion. So even if you would speak with him, he cannot speak with you."

"But at least I must see...."

"The bandages? Mr. Davies, please sit down."

Dumbly I obeyed. Mr. Forster regarded me with a sympathetically arranged face. He said, "I see your brother's landlady spared you the details." Then he studied his wonderfully manicured hands, as if to express the delicacy with which he proceeded.

I found that I was shivering. If only I had come sooner, I thought, might not all this have been avoided?

"The truth is," continued the doctor, speaking as gently as any priest, "that even if Marcus — I may call him Marcus? — regains his mental faculties, his personal appearance will never be — quite right. He has lost one eye completely, you understand. The other is damaged, but may do. We have hopes."

He sighed into my appalled silence.

"There are besides deep incisions in his cheeks and lips, which will certainly leave scars. The instrument he used was not one to cut with a clean edge."

"An *eye?* The *instrument?*" I repeated the words like a primitive struggling to comprehend some outlandish catechism.

"A pen nib. In his demented state, your brother used a pen nib upon himself."

"But — why?"

At the foolishness of this question, Forster opened his white hands to the heavens in a gesture that begged enlightenment. His eager assistant, however, broke in with a rapid speech.

"He has — delusions, sir. When they brought him in, he was all the time crying out that the Fiend had broken loose while he slept and taken revenge upon him."

Fiend? This sounded so unlike Marcus that I protested, "Impossible! ...My brother's not a religious man."

"He's not a sane man, sir," said Forster, and without warning he rose

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stiffly, apparently wearied of the interview. He looked towards the door.

"Do you still insist upon seeing your brother? There are besides documents to sign...."

See him? I rose, swayed, sickish and undecided. To see Marcus, when it came to it was no easier than to abandon him. To peer into a musty cell and see, curled up on a bare mattress my once arrogant brother, maybe to have him wake up and squeak nonsensical things at me — I shrank from the prospect! Who would not? And yet, just to walk away....

Mercifully, observing my confusion, Forster's young assistant came to the rescue, and laying an angelic hand on my sleeve, he suggested. "Would it not be wiser, sir, to come back tomorrow? When you've had time to think?"

Oh, infinitely!

I allowed this deliverer to lead me away, barely gasping out a "Good day" to Forster, before I found myself once more in the corridor.

"I will take you down to the gate," said the assistant, and we walked together, the greater part of the way in silence. In my shocked state, as we went, I noticed strangely irrelevent things: how the stone flags on the inner side of the corridor were more worn than those on the outside, so that it seemed as if everyone in the asylum kept as close as possible to the doors and as far as possible from the windows; and then, how many of these doors had not one, but two keyholes. I also noticed, through a high window, that the rain had turned to an evil mist.

While we crossed the yard, Dr. Forster's assistant disburdened himself of facts and thoughts which I sensed his superior either did not consider important or knew nothing about.

"Your brother's case," he began, glowing with enthusiasm, "interests me greatly. It seems unlike most religious manias... I went round to the house last night, you know."

"You? Ah, yes...."

Dimly I recalled Mrs. Brideson's reference to a doctor's visit.

"I'd hoped to see his room, perhaps find some writing."

"Well," I said, "no doubt you found plenty of that. He came here to write a novel."

The young man smiled and shook his head.

"Oh, I mean a different sort entirely — diaries, journals, jottings, something of a personal nature. Formal writing would be of little interest," and there, in the middle of the courtyard, he stopped to gaze at me earnestly through what we had discovered to be not so much a mist as a thick drizzle.

"If you find anything like that," he insisted, "will you let me have it? It could help your brother enormously. The woman wouldn't let me near anything. Kept talking about compensation and threatened to call the police."

He laughed delightedly at his recollection of the incident, and I took to him, this enthusiast, with raindrops

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shining on his mustache. I thought I detected in him a wholesome enjoyment of life and a practical mind. Surely, I thought, this is the man to help Marcus.

If I found any writing of interest, I promised to deliver it, when I returned the next day.

To my sorrow, I found nothing. Only the soiled heaps of half-written pages and, in the bedside cabinet, my brother's literary effort, the novel, so coarse and so sordid in concept, that I could not stomach it. Indeed, for me this was final, bitter proof of his madness, and even allowing for that, I was ashamed that Marcus should write such trash. Resolutely I took it down to the kitchen stove and consigned it to oblivion. Forster's assistant had said, after all, that the novel would not greatly interest him, and I had no desire to expose the family name to more ridicule than could be helped.

So I burned every page, a sad, dismal business. To this day, the smell of burning paper fills me with nausea, particularly in the evening, if mingled with the smell is the faint hiss of a gas light, for there was a gas lamp in Mrs. Brideson's kitchen, hissing and flickering with a kind of sour indolence while I attended to my task.

To make matters worse, the woman was present. She sat in a rocking-chair by the door, and that chair, creaking backwards and forwards, backwards and forwards, made her appear to be nodding all the time with satisfaction. Then there was the girl, seated at the table, pretending to study exercises in a grubby notebook, but in reality watching me intently. This I found unnerving; whenever I turned from the stove to smile at her, she would immediately lower her eyes to the notebook, as if what she read there was of absorbing interest; and whenever I turned away again to thrust more papers into the flames, she would look up: I could feel her eyes on my neck.

I was glad when it was done, the entire manuscript reduced to ash, and I could escape back upstairs to pack away the rest of my brother's possessions, but even then I worked as speedily as possible, because I hated his room — it still plagued me with the sense of another presence — and I had no sooner made an end of my chore than I retreated to the room that Mrs. Brideson had assigned to me and locked myself in. I went to bed desperate for a sound sleep after the day's ills.

Vain hope! For hours I lay awake, my face to the ceiling, tangled in a web of images: Marcus, the woman in her shawl, the madhouse, the disgusting novel, Dr. Forster with his elegant hands and perky assistant ... dark skeins of meaningless writing.

At last, a little before dawn I dozed off, but only to wake again an hour or so later, feeling weak and sick, quite incapable of a second visit to the asylum; and when I got up, my nerves

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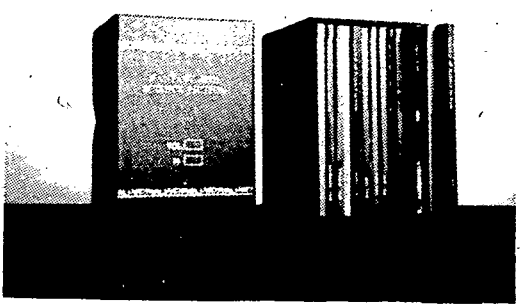
issued an ultimatum. I had crossed to the mirror with my hairbrush, when the sight of my reflection gave me such a fright that I lost any sort of strength and let the brush fall with a thud onto the carpet. Yet it was only my own face, staring wide-eyed and pale, back at me.

What did I do? Blame me, if you will, but as soon as I could extricate myself from 36 Water Tower Street, I took a train for home! I wrote to Forster from the safe distance of Hertfordshire, complimenting him on his sound advice that I should not see Marcus in his present condition, and I desired him to mail any necessary documents.... If, later, a visit from me could be beneficial to my brother, would Forster kindly let me know?

For this dreadful summons, after four years I am still waiting.

To the eager assistant I addressed not a word. What was there to say? I had found no journal, no diary to offer him: I could be of no service. Besides, reading my brother's novel had filled me with such disgust for the workings of crazed minds that — surprisingly enough — this disgust had tainted my estimation of the assistant. So he thought he might rescue Marcus, did he? Very well, let him try! I, for one, knew the limits of my strength and had no desire to tangle with demons.

Indeed, I wondered at the time, and have often wondered since, whether a man may not have to be a little mad himself to set up as champion for the depraved.



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Karen Jollie is a junior high school science teacher in Los Angeles who has published several science fiction stories, most recently in Chrysalis *3.*

Bunny-Eyes

BY

KAREN G. JOLLIE

They come out occasionally. Just occasionally. It's mostly curiosity — and on the part of the younger ones at that — but they come out now and again. You just have to watch for them.

If they're out for the first time and only looking, like tourists wandering through a shopping mall lined with knick-knack shops, then they're easily detected. When the experienced ones decide to join us, they're almost impossible to recognize, except perhaps by an expert like myself. They become the damn knick-knack and sell themselves. But the young ones just examine, wide-eyed. They're not difficult to spot.

I've caught sight of several. I even caught one once and held it for over an hour, taking pictures and making observations. I think that was possible because it really didn't know it was a captive. Or maybe it did, and didn't care, particularly. They're like cats. Curious, you know, like cats. They'll put up with the most preposterous impositions sometimes, just because they are curious as to the purpose of the imposition. I haven't made one mad yet. I'm worried about that. In my line of work, I can't afford to make anything I'm dealing with, mad. It can be fatal, so it's said. I'm not sure about that. There are worse things than dying, and I half-suspect they'd resort to the worse things. But then they're kind of funny about dying anyhow ... not like us. It's not accepted with them like it is with us. They would resort to other things. I sometimes have nightmares about getting them mad.

This one I caught was probably only a couple of hundred years old, if that. It's not that they're naive or anything like that; but you'd be surprised how much a young one comes across

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like a bicentennial adolescent. No. A child. Adolescents are obnoxious. I've never met an adolescent one.

This one was male, young, rather wide-eyed, wide-open. They always give that impression. Wide, wide-open, like bunny-eyes. I've never made the mistake of extrapolating bunny-attitudes on them, though. One doesn't make that kind of mistake and last long in this business. But bunny-eyed it was and just as wary. A young one, I thought, and it doesn't know a thing yet, just what its been told. It won't come out into the open this time, but that's OK. I like to get them in their natural habitat — what's left of it, anyway. That's the stuff I can sell to the Geographic. I get them out in the open and people start blinking; they just can't accept them out among us; they think I'm putting them on. So let it huddle in here, I thought. That's OK. That'll sell.

I had this joker try to fool me once. He'd read my stuff and thought he could put one over on me. April fool. He had the right physical characteristics for it ... you know, tall and thin. Well, not thin exactly. Slender. Fair-skinned, dark-haired and slender, really slender for a man. With long delicate fingers. His legs were sort of lanky, though. I guess he'd gotten a lot of razzing about his build; maybe that's why he tried it. Anyway, he whipped up this jerkin that didn't fit right and some light-colored pants and soft leather shoes — all the wrong design, put together wrong, you know — and he finds out where I'm staked out and comes mincing out of the misty morning thickets (wet to the skin) expecting me to believe he's one of them. He was one of those idiots who honestly believe that they act like fairies, if you know what I mean. Which couldn't be further from the truth. He couldn't fool an old hand like me with a get-up like that if I were blindfolded and ear-plugged. For one thing, he couldn't walk right. The real ones walk as if gravity doesn't exist for them. They don't even leave footprints. He couldn't copy that. No way.

So this guy comes mincing up to me and says hi, and I told him to get the hell out of my territory because he'd scare them all away. He tried to act naive and all that — the way I wrote about the second one I saw — but I finally got mad enough to threaten to lower his pinkie with my tripod, 500 mm. lens and all, then he cut out, looking hurt. Never did spot a real one in that area, though. Maybe this jerk *had* scared 'em all away. I had to move almost 400 miles before I found a good spot again.

Oh, yeah, the one I caught. Well, I wouldn't walk up to one and say hi. I consider them in much the same light as I would a grizzly bear — just sort of stand back and observe, but don't interfere. When I first started, I honestly thought they didn't know I was there. Not any more. They know. I guess they just don't care much if you watch

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them and not bother them. When I came across this one, I still believed that they weren't aware of me and for once I was right. He was a young one, remember.

I was in this thicket and the sun had come up maybe an hour or so ago. It was about 6:45. I was eating a doughnut for breakfast. Up until now, I had only spotted them right at dawn and they'd be gone in a half-hour or less. So I was having breakfast because I was sure the day was already shot. The tripod was still there. I was too lazy to take it down. A little coffee, a little something to eat, and then I'd break the blind and go back to camp.

It was leaning on an oak tree, a young one. You really get to like the old ones; they've got personality. This one didn't, it was just there to lean on. I was in this particular thicket because it felt right. There are thickets and there are thickets. Some you just beat your way through — they are damn nuisances. But some you worm through, and when you get in the center, there's always a space there, breathing room. And as you breathe the thicket, the space is a secret space, a special place, and your pulse rate goes to 120 and you just know.

There was a clearing to the north of this particular thicket, with the stump of a beech tree in the center of it. Some bastard had chopped the beech down for firewood. The tree took one hundred and twenty leisurely years to stand there, and some bastard needs firewood, and bam, gone. Damn shame. A good stump for sitting on, though.

Anyway, I looked through this screen of bushes and, damn, if there wasn't one of them sitting on the stump; it had its knees bunched up and it was all bunny-eyed.

My heart really jumped, because at first I doubted it was real. Maybe another joker. But the thighs were full and there was that wide bunny-stare, straight at the sun. The sun was staring back in its usual daffodil haughtiness, sort of squinting because it wasn't fully awake yet. I had that twinge of doubt still; the thing wasn't moving, and you can't be too sure until you see them move. But the light was sliding across the stump and its occupant. There, behind, was the shadow of the stump, all long and sullen and slanty, but there was no shadow of any occupant, and I knew I had one. The camera was focused on the stump from before, for depth of focus, so I just pressed the shutter.

It twitched.

I've always wished they'd invent an absolutely silent camera, and though the vireos and song sparrows were doing their best to drown it out, the damn shutter still plopped horribly, and the thing twitched — I saw it. I cringed because I knew it heard, and I got sort of nervous because I had never been sure they had been aware of me before, but I was sure now, and after all, it was a young one and the young ones are un-

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predictable: But it still sat there and only closed its bunny-eyes and curled its hands about its knees. So I thought, OK, it might not care if I were here watching it as long as I just watched. So I got up slowly and cocked the shutter again with infinite patience, slowly, delicately.

Then it put its fine, fine feet on the ground in their soft leather shoes, and it stretched its fine long arms with its long fine fingers first clenched tight, then spread out in butterflies of aliveness, and it got up slowly and it looked at the ground and I got two more pictures.

Then it looked through everything, the blind and everything. It looked at me and at the camera with its bunny-eyes with no expression but openness, and I really got scared and started to wish I wasn't there. It walked straight toward us, my camera and me, and I became the bunny now, all huddled and frozen with that crazy stupid hope that bunnies have: that the thing that was staring at us didn't really see us, and maybe it would go away or just get bored with our stillness and go on doing whatever it had been doing before. But it walked right up and came around and stared with its ravenous curiosity at me and my camera.

At that moment, I got some idea of the insanity of what I was doing.

Up close, the thing was well over six feet and didn't even bend the grass blades it was standing on, and the shoulders were out to here, and the slenderness of the limbs was just an illusion, because — God! — the enormous strength in that thing just radiated from it, and I only kept hoping the strength was only physical. It raised one powerful slender hand and pointed and said in its bunny-voice, "What's that?" meaning the camera.

My voice just sat in my larynx and refused to move. So the thing said again, with an open touch of quiet patience, "What's that?" sort of waiting like a child does for a preoccupied teacher to notice it, even though she heard the question both times.

So I swallowed hard and fiddled noiselessly with my vocal cords while I tried to put on some measure of nonchalence, and I finally croaked out, "It's a camera," even as it occurred to me that such a reply really didn't explain anything. This was a young one; it didn't know about anything other than life and love and sorrow and maybe death too. They know about death real well. They just don't accept it, like I said. It looked at me, the openness and the patience untarnished, and said again in a very clear voice (so that it could be sure to be understood completely), "What's that?" tactfully ignoring the fact that an incomplete — actually stupid — answer had already been given.

So I gathered myself as best I could and started explaining about lenses and light and photosensitive emulsions and inverted images and whatnot, only just marveling that the thing had openly

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approached me and had spoken clearly in my language. Did it understand my language? But it watched me solemnly as I spoke, and there were invisible tendrils of grasp that radiated from the gray bunny-open eyes that enveloped my words and my thoughts and my fear, and it only nodded until I was done. Then it said, "I did not know you were there before," and it was apologizing. (I found out the reason for the apology only later. The pictures I took all that morning came out beautifully, except for the first one. It showed a field of grass, a stump, trees, a bit of sky. Nothing else. The thing was not aware of the camera; so I guess the camera was unaware of it. That's how I'm sure now that the others I have seen always knew I was watching them ... all the pictures always came out.)

I said, "You speak our language beautifully," and it shrugged as if this were a minor thing. It knew I knew, and there was acceptance of that. There was warning in the shrug too, because it understood that I knew only of its being and not of its nature — not yet.

"Don't you like the sun?" it asked.

"Certainly," I said, reminding myself that it was a young one, it was still learning about us. Well, about me.

"Let us go to the sun, then," it said. It was a statement, not a suggestion. My first impulse was to gather the equipment, but even as my fingers touched the metal, I was embarrassed, not sure whether this could be interpreted as insult. If it were, it was passed over, because the thing merely walked out into the sunbath with no sign of annoyance, its feet leaving the grass unbent, its body leaving it unshaded. I got prickly and cursed myself quietly because the tape recorder in my jacket had been idle all this time. I decided I would introduce the contraption, though, before I made any attempt to use it. I did, and the thing only shrugged, and the recorder went to work.

"Have you been out to the road?" I asked when we had settled in the sun. I guess I wanted its reaction to asphalt and gravel and power lines and gum-wrappers and the black tortured strips that were shed from disintegrating truck tires. But it only shook its head, with some internal humor, seemingly. OK, stay in your habitat for now, I thought. It sells.

We talked for an hour and the sun strode higher and glared at us with more annoyance, for I sweated. Speech for the thing was an intermittent affair, for it often answered with shrugs or expressions or quick facile motions of its fingers. I asked a lot of questions about sun and streams and the Others, and when they came, and why. It always answered so simply, sometimes wordlessly. The tape is full of silences. You listen to the whole thing dazed, but all the words and gestures boiled down to nothing more than: "I am and at this moment I am here with you. Accept this." Just that;

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no matter what I asked, it all came back to that. I still shiver when I hear that tape, and I'm not sure whether it is from terror or ecstasy. Maybe it's both.

And I took pictures, lots of them. Some of them were brilliant things that captured the aura of power around it, an aura of blue and white and sometimes gold that wasn't light at all, nor shadow nor substance. They love that at Geographic. The pictures come out so true, they radiate whatever it is that the thing has, turned visual. The power bath from it was like the sun, but not hot. Just, well, strong and full of being. And it comes right out of the pictures.

Near the end, the thing reached down and found a stone, a little white stone. It fondled it a moment, then it handed the stone to me like a benediction. I accepted the gift wordlessly. I still have it. I never get sick headaches any more.

We were finally interrupted. You could hear them coming about a half-mile away, the kids chattering as kids will in a wood. Far off, I could see garish orange balls dancing among the understory. I guessed the balls were bobbers on the ends of fishing rods. The path to the lake led past this clearing, and the people must be heading for a day of fishing. Late start, I thought, for fishing. But this thing was out late, too; extraordinarily late for one of its kind. "Don't *you* like the sun?" I asked it at last, and it seemed to understand the purpose of the question, the multiplicity of the "you," and it smiled — or rather radiated smiling — and said, "We enjoy it elsewhere," but it never offered to explain where "elsewhere" might be located. So I only nodded sagely and didn't ask any more. I knew, with the people coming, it would be gone soon. It was out so very late. A young one.

It asked, "Which way is the road?" and I pointed and it nodded.

"Will I see you again?" I asked and realized my voice held a plaintive note, the begging of a child.

"Perhaps. Perhaps." It looked restless and finally deigned to turn its head in the direction of the noises.

"Here?" I pursued.

"Perhaps."

It got up and its tread, though unhurried, took it to the clump of birches on the far side in less time than it took me to get on my feet. The noises of the approaching people were near now, near enough to indicate they would be able to see into the clearing. I glanced back at the birches, but it was gone. I felt bitter suddenly with my tape recorder and my camera — a hollowness of trinkets left to represent a happening that might never recur. I clenched the white stone unhappily.

I felt selfish and dull. Dámn Geographic! They get you thinking the way they think. These things only come out occasionally, come out of curiosity. They come, after all, to discover. What I had done was to turn

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this around, ask it questions, probe it, pry, observe, record. It took the effrontery patiently, with no resentment for spoiling its moment of exploration. Well, it was a young one and probably thought that people and cameras and some vague reference to roads were all there was to this complex world of ours. A pretty dull world, not worth exploring. I never gave it a chance to discover all the things there were to be curious about — internal-combustion engines and cantilevered buildings and television and strolls on the moon. I might even have driven it off by boring it interminably. Ah, well, I wasn't thinking straight. Just like me to ruin my source of bread and butter.

I would come back, though. Come back here and wait. You never know.

I packed up my things and wandered disconsolately toward the lake. The lake was a good spot for pictures. It was a modest lake with patches of marsh grass and big shady trees overhanging the banks. The coots went about their coot business daily, and there were duck visitors, and goose visitors, and sandpiper visitors. There was a marsh across the way — tangled mats of cattails dead, and colonnades of catttails living, toured by marsh wrens and bitterns, with the blackbirds hawking admission. A good place for pictures if you had a quick eye and a long lens.

I came out near the small dock. The family that had passed by had settled in there. The mother had spread the checkered cloth on the shaded lawn, and the father and two older boys were down below, making hollow thumps in their aluminum craft as they loaded up for a long day of excessive Evinrude horsepower and grumbles about lake trout too snooty to be tempted by salmon eggs. A boy no more than two tugged repeatedly at Mommy's bodice, assuring himself of her solidity, while he examined the glassy deadliness of deep water. I wandered away from the picnic, slithering along the shore under overhanging branches, watching for turtles or something better, thinking Geographic thoughts.

A little girl was sitting on a dirt bank, dangling a forefinger in the water. She was decorated with those silly corduroy overalls with the bib. One knee was caked with wet mud and she was pouting. I got a shot with her reflection that later won an Honorable Mention. She looked up afterwards and only scowled at my "Hi."

"What's the matter?" I asked. I squatted beside her to reduce my size.

"Mommy *never* believes me!" she asserted with some heat. "What's your name?"

"Lisa," I said. "What's yours?"

"Gretchen." She stuck out her lower lip.

"What doesn't Mommy believe this time?"

The scowl only deepened and her gaze returned to the water. I heard the harsh cough of the Evinrude and listened to the rattled echoes of protest rais-

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ed by the rails hidden among the rushes. "Grown-ups doesn't believe nothin'," she muttered at last.

I grinned, thinking about my pursuit of a thing more elusive than most peoples' dreams. "You'd be surprised," I said.

She studied me, measuring with narrowed eyes. She raised a defiant chin and stated in challenge: "I saw an elf this morning."

"How did you know it was an elf?"

She snorted, taking my question for doubt. "'Cause it *tole* me so."

"I wonder," I said, "if that was the same elf *I* saw this morning."

Her eyes went very round and she dove into a detailed description of my morning's companion. I only half listened, nodding, watching those eyes get more and more bunny-like, as they perceived my open acceptance. Children's eyes are so often that way, I thought.

Just like its eyes.

I know now why they come occasionally, with their power and age, their aura of life, love, sorrow and death. They do not come because they are curious.

They come because we are.

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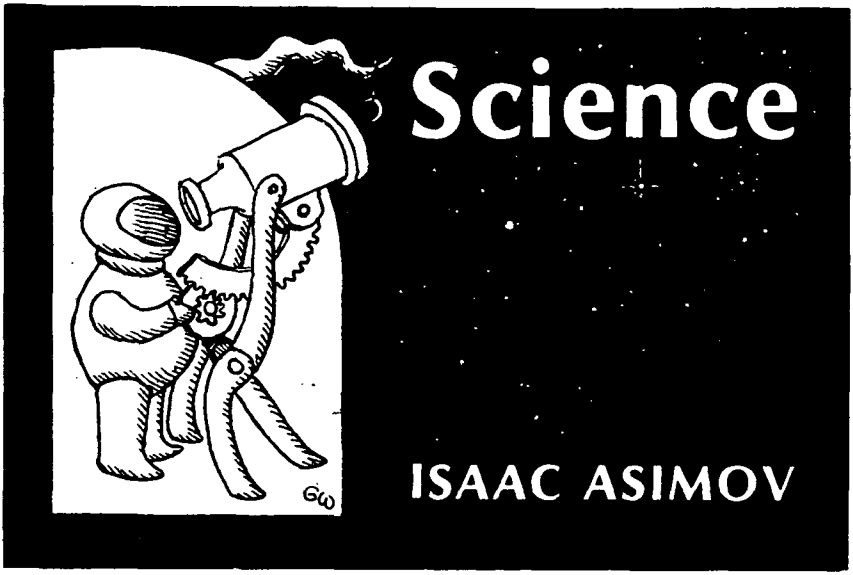

MORE CROWDED!

I don't often make specific long-range promises in these essays. Sometimes I say, specifically, that I will discuss a particular subject further in the next issue — very short-range. Sometimes I say that something is a subject to be taken up "another time" — very unspecific.

In my essay "Crowded!" (F&SF, March 1967), however, I discussed some aspects of the population problem as related to the large cities of the world and concluded the article with the following paragraph:

"Where it will all end, I don't know. I can only wait in terror as each day is more crowded than the one before. Ten years from now — if we are all still alive — I shall return to this theme and see how things have progressed."

Will, it's time, especially since I have just received a new book of statistics, "The Book of World Rankings" by George Thomas Kurian (Facts on File, 1979).

Mr. Kurian drew upon the best international statistics available (sometimes admittedly imperfect), and I will make use, with gratitude and thanks, of his labors. Let's see what has happened to us with respect to city population in 12 years.

First, to set the background (and this is not material out of Kurian):

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From what I have been able to gather, the world population was something like 3,300,000,000 in 1967 and something like 4,120,000,000 in 1979. We have increased the world population in the last 12 years by 800,000,000 mouths, or by 25 percent. To put it still another way, we have added another China to the population of the world.

It is quite likely that we will end the decade of the 1980s with a world population edging toward 5,000,000,000, having added still another China. The population growth of the 1970s has indeed been terrifying and has contributed enormously to the change for the worse in world economy and social structure in the last 12 years.

The population growth that could now take place in the 1980s is quite likely to be catastrophic. And having said that, let us go on to the cities.

In 1967, I was living in a Boston suburb and, lacking specific statistics, I guessed that Boston was no better than 151st in the World Ranking of cities. I believe that was a pretty good guess, but Kurian, in his 313th Table, lists all the cities with a population of over 500,000 in the world. There are 287 cities in that list and Boston, with a population given as 636,725 is listed in 207th place.

In my earlier article, I defined a Great City as one which contained a population of more than 1,000,000, and in 1967, I listed six American cities as Great Cities. At the present moment, those six are still Great Cities and no new ones have been added in the United States. Here they are:

Table 1 — The Great Cities of the United States

World	*American*	*Great City*	*Population**	
			1979	*1967*
5	1	New York	7,481,613	8,080,000
23	2	Chicago	3,099,391	3,520,000
29	3	Los Angeles	2,727,399	2,740,000
50	4	Philadelphia	1,815,808	2,030,000
76	5	Houston	1,357,394	1,100,000
78	6	Detroit	1,337,557	1,600,000

**I don't consider the population statistics in this article to be necessarily accurate to the last digit, or that what I call 1979 represents that year exactly or 1967 that year. Different cities are counted with different degrees of care and accuracy in different years, and estimates in the absence of reliable censuses can be wrong, too. On the whole, though, I think the figures in this article represent the correct essence of what is happening to population these last 12 years.*

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Notice that the population of five out of the six cities has declined in the last 12 years. Detroit is the most extreme, having lost 1/6 of its population and fallen behind Houston, the only American Great City to have gained population in the interval.

The phenomenon of urban population loss is common to many American cities. Thus, in 1967, I asked the readers to identify the largest American city that was not a Great city. The answer then was Baltimore, and that answer still holds, but Baltimore's population has also declined, from 925,000 to 851,698, a loss of nearly 8 percent.

The total population of the American Great Cities was, in 1967, 19,070,000. In 1979, it was 17,800,000 for a decline of nearly 7 percent.

This does not mean the total American population is dropping. It is still rising, although at a slower rate than that of the world in general. In 1967, the population of the United States was about 197,600,000, and in 1979 it was about 218,000,000, a gain of just over 10 percent.

The percentage of Americans living in the Great Cities declined from 9.65 percent in 1967 to 8.17 percent in 1979, but this does not mean that the United States is growing less urbanized or more rural.

The population that is leaving the Great Cities (and the large cities generally) is flooding into the suburbs at the rim of the city, which are part of the "metropolitan area" marked off from the central city by arbitrary political lines intended to give the suburbs the benefit of the city without responsibility for its problems.

The metropolitan areas are continuing to grow, and there are about forty in the United States that have populations of more than a million.

In my 1967 essay, I moved on to the three nations that were more populous than the United States. They were, then, China, India and the Soviet Union in that order, and it remains true today. Here are the comparative statistics of the four top nations:

Table 2 — Population of the Most Populous Nations

World Ranking	*Nation*	*Population*		
		1979	*1967*	*% increase*
1	China	973,334,000	750,000,000	29.8
2	India	649,354,000	475,000,000	36.7
3	Soviet Union	260,178,000	230,000,000	13.1
4	United States	217,799,000	197,600,000	10.2

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At the present time, China possesses 23.6 percent of the world's population and India, 15.7 percent. The four most populous nations of the world contain a total population of just over 2,100,000,00, or almost exactly half the number of people in the world.

Each of the three nations with populations exceeding that of the United States had more Great Cities in 1967 than we had — and they still do.

In 1967, with what statistics I had at hand I located no less than 16 Great Cities in China, each with a population of more than a million. In Kurian's book I can find only 14 Great Cities listed.* I suspect this reflects a general improvement in the accuracy of Chinese statistics available to the rest of the world in the last dozen years.

There is one impossibility in Kurian's table, however. In 1967, I listed the city of Shanghai as the largest of the Chinese Great Cities, with a population of about 7,000,000, and the latest figures I have, other than Kurian's list, gives it a population of over 10,000,000 now. In Kurian's list, however, Shanghai is in 97th place (!) among the cities of the world, with a population of 1,082,000. I can only assume that a zero dropped out of the figure and that the computer that prepared the list followed its instructions and placed Shanghai impossibly far down and that no human proof-reader noticed. I feel the population should be 10,082,000, and that is the figure I am going to use, changing the "world ranking" figures that Kurian gives accordingly.

I will save space by listing only those Chinese Great Cities with populations of over 2,000,000. There are six of these compared with four for the United States.

Table 3 — The Most Populous Cities in China

World Ranking	*City*	*Population*		
		1979	*1967*	*% change*
1	Shanghai	10,082,000	7,000,000	+44.0
4	Peking	7,570,000	6,800,000	+11.3
13	Tientsin	4,280,000	2,900,000	+47.6
35	Mukden	2,411,000	3,100,000	−22.2
41	Wuhan	2,146,000	(unlisted)	
42	Chungking	2,121,000	2,200,000	− 3.6

**It actually contains 15, but it lists "Nagoya, China" which is a clear misprint for "Nagoya, Japan," and I made the correction in my copy.*

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Harbon and Canton, listed as over 2,000,000 in 1967, are listed by Kurian as under that figure now. I suspect that my 1967 figures were not necessarily very accurate in connection with the Chinese cities.

The total population of the 14 Great Cities of China in Kurian's list is 39,500,000 as compared with 38,000,000 for the 16 Great Cities I listed in 1967. The Great City population of China is 2.2 times as great as that of the Great City population of the United States, but that is not as great as one would expect from the disparity in total population. After all, the total population of China is 4.2 times that of the United States.

Although 8.17 percent of the American population lives in the Great Cities, only 4.0 percent of the Chinese population does.

As for India, Kurian lists eight Great Cities, as compared to the six I had listed in 1967. All six of my 1967 list are included, and the cities of Bangalore and Kanpur are included in addition. The four largest Indian cities have populations of over 2,000,000 and here they are:

Table 4 — The Most Populous Cities in India

World Ranking	*City*	*Population*		
		1979	*1967*	*% change*
8	Bombay	5,970,575	4,540,000	+31.5
20	Delhi	3,287,883	2,300,000	+43.0
22	Calcutta	3,148,746	3,005,000	+ 4.8
34	Madras	2,469,449	1,840,000	+34.2

Since 1967, Madras has graduated into the 2,000,000 rank and none has fallen out of it. The total population of the eight Great Cities of India is about 20,750,000 (3.2 percent of the total population) as against 14,000,000 in 1967 (2.2 percent of the total population).

This brings us to the Soviet Union for which, in 1967, I listed seven Great Cities. Kurian's table, however, lists no fewer than 12, which puts the Soviet Union second only to China in this respect. In addition to the seven I listed in 1967, we now have Kuibyshev, Sverdlovsk, Tbilisi, Odessa and Omsk.

Only three of the Great Cities of the Soviet Union have populations of over 2,000,000 (compared with 2 in 1967). Here they are:

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Table 5 — The Most Populous Cities in the Soviet Union

World Ranking	City	Population		
		1979	1967	% change
7	Moscow	6,941,961	6,334,000	+ 9.6
18	Leningrad	3,512,974	3,218,000	+ 9.2
45	Kiev	2,103,000	1,292,000	+62.8

The total population of the 12 Great Cities of the Soviet Union is 23,600,000, as compared with 15,000,000 for the seven Great Cities of 1967. The percent of the population living in Great Cities was 9.0 in 1979 as compared with 6.5 in 1967.

In the world ranking of population, Indonesia is in 5th place immediately behind the United States, and Japan is in 6th place. For the purposes of this article, which deals with cities, we can pass by Indonesia as a non-industrial nation, and move on to Japan, which is highly industrialized and citified. In fact, we can lump Japan with the four most populous nations and call them the Big Five.

Japan's total population in 1979 is listed in Kurian as 114,595,000 as compared to 96,200,000 in 1967, a rise of 19.1 percent. In 1967, I listed seven Great Cities in Japan. Kurian's list shows eight, made up of my seven plus the city of Sapporo. Four of the Japanese Great Cities now have populations of over 2,000,000 as compared with 2 in 1967 and here they are:

Table 6 — The Most Populous Cities in Japan

World Ranking	City	Population		
		1979	1967	% change
3	Tokyo	8,442,634	8,730,000	− 3.3
30	Osaka	2,714,642	3,200,000	−15.2
32	Yokohama	2,610,124	1,600,000	+63.1
43	Nagoya	2,083,111	1,900,000	+ 9.6

The total population of the Great Cities of Japan is about 20,860,000 in 1979, as compared to 18,800,000 in 1967. The percentage of the Japanese population that lives in the Great Cities is 18.2 in 1979 as compared to 19.5 in 1967. This is a small decline, but the percentage of the Great City

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population is nevertheless higher in Japan than in any of the others of the Big Five.

Suppose we consider the Big Five nations together. The total number of Great Cities in the Big Five is 48 compared to the 42 I listed in 1967.

In 1967, however, I pointed out that there were 46 Great Cities remaining in nations other than the Big Five. In Kurian's list there are 61 Great Cities in those other nations. In other words, there were 88 Great Cities in the world in 1967 and 109 in 1979, an increase of 23.9 percent. Dividing them by continents, this is what happens:

Table 7 — Great Cities of the World

Continent	*Great Cities*		*Total Population*		
	1979	*1967*	*1979*	*1967*	*% change*
Asia	52	42	126,900,000	91,700,000	+ 38.4
Europe	28	25	60,900,000	51,300,000	+ 18.7
North America	11	9	31,400,000	24,200,000	+ 29.7
South America	10	7	26,260,000	15,100,000	+ 73.9
Africa	6	3	13,660,000	6,100,000	+124.
Australia	2	2	5,520,000	4,300,000	+ 28.3
Total	109	88	264,640,000	192,700,000	+ 37.3

As you see, the Great City population is increasing somewhat faster than the general world population, and this is particularly true in South America and in Africa. In 1967, 5.84 percent of the world population (1 in 17) lived in a Great City. In 1979, 6.42 percent (1 in 15.5) did.

In my 1967 essay, I asked which was the largest nation that did not contain a Great City. The answer I then gave was Nigeria, which I said had a population of 56,400,000, while its largest city and capital, Lagos, had a population of only 665,000.

Well, Nigeria's population is now 67,520,000 and Lagos, with a population of 1,061,221 is one of the Great Cities. The new candidate, if we go by Kurian's tables, is South Africa, with a population of 25,003,000 and with Durban its largest city at 730,000.

If you look through the Great Cities I have listed so far in the Big Five, you will notice that Shanghai, China is in 1st place in the World Ranking, while Tokyo is in 3rd place, Peking in 4th, and New York in 5th.

Second place is missing so it has to be a city in a nation that is not one of the Big Five. I wonder how many of you can guess what the second largest

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city in the world happens to be at the moment (at least according to Kurian's tables). Frankly, I would not have guessed it — and it isn't London, if any of you have guessed that.

I'll tell you. It's Mexico City. In 1967, I listed its population as 3,193,000, and it has increased 170 percent in 12 years. This seems hard to believe, and it may be that Mexico City has, in the interval, absorbed some of its suburbs. Even so, it is growing at a phenomenal rate.

Here is the list of the 10 largest cities in the world:

Table 8 — The Largest Cities in the World

World Ranking		*City*	*Population*		
1979	*1967*		*1979*	*1967*	*% change*
1	4	Shanghai, China	10,082,000	7,000,000	+ 44.0
2	13	Mexico City, Mexico	8,628,024	3,193,000	+170.2
3	1	Tokyo, Japan	8,442,634	8,730,000	− 3.3
4	5	Peking, China	7,570,000	6,800,000	+ 11.3
5	3	New York, U.S.	7,481,613	8,080,000	− 7.4
6	2	London, U.K.	7,167,600	8,185,000	− 12.5
7	6	Moscow, U.S.S.R.	6,941,961	6,334,000	+ 9.6
8	7	Bombay, India	5,970,575	4,540,000	+ 31.5
9	9	Cairo, Egypt	5,715,000	3,518,000	+ 62.5
10	19	Jakarta, Indonesia	5,476,009	2,907,000	+ 88.4

As you see, there are two newcomers to the list of the big ten in the last dozen years, Mexico City and Jakarta. The two that have dropped out to make room are Chicago, which was in 8th place in 1967, and Leningrad, which was in 10th place in 1967.

China is the only nation which places two cities in the top ten, though in 1967, the Soviet Union and the United States also did. By continents, in 1979, five Great Cities are Asian, two are European, two are North American and one is African. In 1967, the figures were four, three, two and one respectively.

The total population of the top ten cities is about 73,500,000 in 1979 or about 1.8 percent of the population of the world. In 1967, it was 59,900,000 also about 1.8 percent of the population of the world. No change there.

I don't want to leave you without suggesting a parlor game guaranteed to keep your guests (if they are the intellectual parlor game type) busy for

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an entire evening. If you supply them with some drinks to sip at, and paper and pen, you can then slip away and go to a movie.

It is simple: Just ask them to make two columns. In one column, they can list the largest city in the world that begins with each of the letters of the alphabet in order; in the second, the largest city in the United States.

I'll give *you* the answers naturally, and here they are:

A — That's a difficult one right away. It is Alexandria, Egypt, with a population of 2,259,000. The largest American city beginning with A is Atlanta, Georgia, population 436,000.

B — Bombay, India, 5,970,575. If you want to eliminate that because it's too easy; second largest is Berlin, if you count East and West together, making it 4,085,960. If you don't want to allow the combination, that brings you to Buenos Aires at 2,972,453. The largest American B is Baltimore, Maryland, 851,698.

C — Cairo, Egypt, 5,715,000. The largest American C is, as anyone can guess, Chicago, Illinois, 3,099,391. If Chicago is too easy, then try the second largest which is Cleveland, Ohio, 638,693.

D — Delhi, India, 3,287,883. The largest American D is Detroit, Michigan, 1,335,085. If that's too easy, the next largest is Dallas, Texas, 812,797.

E — This one isn't at all easy. It is Erevan, Soviet Union, 928,000. I've seen it spelled Yerevan and if it is disqualified for that reason then the next largest is Essen, West Germany, 677,508. The largest American E is El Paso, Texas, 385,691.

F — One of the hardest in the list. The largest is Fushun, China, 985,000. And if you miss that, you won't get the second largest either which is Fukuoka, Japan, 964,755. The American F is Fort Worth, Texas, 358,364.

G — Guadalajara, Mexico, 1,640,902. The American G is Grand Rapids, Michigan, 187,946.

H — Ho Chih Minh City, Vietnam, 1,825,297. If you're one of those old-fashioned souls who insists on calling it Saigon, then you'll have to pass on to the next largest, which is Hamburg, West Germany, 1,717,383. The American H is, of course, Houston, Texas, 1,357,394. If you disqualify that as too easy, then the next in line is Honolulu, Hawaii, 324,871.

I — Istanbul, Turkey, 2,376,296. Some people might want to disqualify it because it is really Constantinople — but it isn't: It's name hasn't been officially Constantinople for five hundred years. The American I is Indianapolis, Indiana, 735,007. Next in line is Independence, Mo., 111,481.

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J — Jakarta, Indonesia, 5,476,009. I've seen it spelled Djakarta and if anyone uses it as the largest D, then that leaves the next place for Johannesburg, South Africa, 654,682. The American J is Jacksonville, Florida, 562,283.

K — Karachi, Pakistan, 3,498,634. The American K is Kansas City, Missouri, 472,529.

L — London, of course, 7,167,000. If you want to eliminate that as too easy, you must move down to Leningrad, 3,513,974. The American L is Los Angeles, 2,727,399, and if you want to eliminate *that*, then its Long Beach, California, or Louisville, Kentucky, in a virtual tie at about 336,000.

M — Mexico City, of course, 8,628,024, then Moscow, 6,941,961, and then Madrid, Spain, 3,520,320. The American M is Milwaukee, Wisconsin, 665,796, with Memphis, Tennessee right behind at 661,319.

N — Yes, New York, 7,481,613, with Nagoya, Japan, 2,083,111 in second place. The American N in second place is New Orleans, Louisiana, 559,770.

O — Osaka, Japan, 2,714,642. The American O is Omaha, Nebraska, 371,455.

P — Peking, China, 7,570,000, with Paris in second place, 2,290,000. The American P is Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, 1,815,808, and in second place is Phoenix, Arizona, 664,721.

Q — Quezon City, Philippines, 994,679. The American Q is Quincy, Massachusetts, 91,494.

R — Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, 4,252,009. In second place is Rome, 2,868,248. The American R is Rochester, New York, 267,173, closely followed by Richmond, Virginia, 232,652.

S — Seoul, South Korea, 5,433,198. The American S may be a fooler. It isn't St. Louis, Missouri, San Antonio, Texas, or San Francisco, California. It is San Diego, California, 773,996.

T — Tokyo, of course, 8,442,634; with Tientsin, China in second place 4,280,000 and Teheran, Iran in third place, 4,002,000. The American T is Toledo, Ohio, 367,650.

U — Ufa, Soviet Union, 923,000 (and that's not one that is likely to be guessed.) The American U is Utica, New York, 91,340.

V — Vienna, Austria, 1,614,841. The American V is Virginia Beach, Virginia, 213,954.

W — Wuhan, China, 2,146,000, and Warsaw comes next 1,448,900. The American W is Washington, D.C., 711,518.

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X — Xenia, Ohio, 25,373. Second is Xanthi, Greece, 25,341. This gives rise to a fine conundrum: "What have New York City and Xenia, Ohio got in common?" The answer is that if you list the largest city in the world for each initial letter, the *only* American cities on the list are New York City and Xenia.

Y — Yokohama, Japan, 2,610,124. The American Y is Yonkers, New York, 192,509.

Z — Zaporozhye, Soviet Union, 760,000 (who'll get that?). The American Z is Zanesville, Ohio, 33,045.

Very well, then, if in another decade or so, we're all still alive, I'll take another look at the situation.

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Over the past ten years Stephen Tall has written a most popular series of eight stories about the explorations of Earth's first starship, the Stardust. *The stories include one novel, THE RAMSGATE PARADOX, and several of the shorter pieces have appeared in F&SF, most recently "Mushroom World," November 1974. Here is the first new story in several years in the series, concerning the crew of the* Stardust's *attempt to track down a mysterious life-form on the planet Methane II.*

The Merry Men of Methane

BY

STEPHEN TALL

The star Methane lies twenty-three light-years from the Sol system. Any astronomer has long been able to tell you that. Methane is a yellow star, a G-type star, a star the planets of which might conceivably have life potential. All this, too, has been common knowledge for centuries. But that was all we knew.

Now, we know more.

I probably didn't reflect on these things as I stood looking down at the artifact at my feet. Even the fact that I was here, the rays from that star warm on my face, breathing the tolerable air of its second planet, didn't seem to me too remarkable. We had done it all before. Not here, of course, but on many other worlds strung out deep into the Galaxy.

I bent and picked up the object. In a curious way its smooth worn handle seemed to fit my hands. Whoever or whatever had made it must have had hands too. Big hands. Hands bigger than mine. And I, as you may know, am a somewhat outsized man.

The thing was simply a club, a bludgeon, maybe three and a half feet long, and rudely carved and chipped from stone. A granite club. You can imagine the weight of such a weapon; and that it was a weapon I had no doubt whatever. I swung it back and forth like a huge stone baseball bat, and felt the muscles in my shoulders pull.

"There were giants in the land in those days."

I spoke aloud, a habit I have when I'm out in the field alone. Then I leaned the club against a boulder, slid my hand downward to the comforting feel of the laser gun that hung at my right hip. The thought had occurred that the giants might still be about.

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It didn't seem likely. I stood high on the crest of a rocky ridge. Below me boulder fields lay jumbled, and rock slides, and little cliffs. The whole extensive ridge seemed simply to have been piled there, strewn in a long line across the endless plain below. There was cover for small creatures, but anything big enough to swing that club would have found hiding hard. I swept my eyes over the whole panorama, and was reassured.

My belt communicator buzzed gently. The speaker cleared its throat.

"Dr. Kissinger! Calling Dr. Kissinger! Come in, Roscoe."

I activated my microphone.

"Roscoe, Stony. What gives?"

Stony Price, communications chief, is literally the center of all the activities of the explorer ship *Stardust*. I think sometimes we tend to forget that. Stony himself contributes to that blind spot. For he works hard at being peculiar.

"You're forty-five minutes past reporting time, friend. That's what gives. The devil could carry you off, and we'd never know. Even worse, Dr. Rasmussen would be annoyed."

"Sorry, Stony. Time just flies when you're having fun. I'm up on the ridge, not far away. I have you in view. Be in soon. Not to worry."

"*I* don't worry," Stony grouched. "The fewer of you there are, the easier my job. Out!"

I chuckled aloud — and then became serious quickly. A sound had come from the rocks nearby. It could almost have been an echo of my laugh, but it was higher in pitch, with something alien about it. It wasn't an echo, but it was, I suspected, an imitation.

I slipped the laser from its holster. As stealthily as my big frame would allow I crept around the scatter of boulders from which the sound had seemed to come. There was nothing there. And no sign of anything. I looked for displaced stones; evidences that the little clusters of lichens and clubmosses had been stepped on; anything. I'm a fair trail man, and I've spent my life getting better. Anything there I would have seen.

"Imagination."

Again I spoke aloud, knowing full well that it hadn't been. I had heard somebody laugh.

I returned the laser to its holster, moved along the ridge to an open spot where nothing could come at me unobserved. I wasn't concerned, but to be careful was habit. I had managed somehow to survive on forty life worlds, mainly because of that one habit.

As I had told Stony Price, I did have him in view. Down on the plain below me I could see the long metallic cylinder of the *Stardust*, fifteen hundred feet of gray, inscrutable mystery, lying full length against the edge of what seemed to be low green jungle. The life of many worlds had seen and, I'm sure, marveled at that sight. There was nothing like it in the Galaxy.

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But to me it was familiar. It was home. The *Stardust* was Earth's first starship, and still is the only spaceship equipped with Ultraspan. The reasons for that fact are good and sufficient, and the restriction, in my view, wise. For when Ultraspan finally becomes available to any who can construct, install and implement it, the Galaxy will be opened to the human race. And the time for that is not yet.

I zoomed my binoculars onto the ship and its surroundings. Tiny figures moved in and out of several open ports, but they were too far to recognize. I could see the little complex of small pens and shelters that comprised what we called Jim Peters' zoo. In addition to the housing of zoologist Peters' specimens, the area always serves as a reference spot for many of the *Stardust's* personnel. It is a shortcut to awareness of the life of each world. For if it is alive, Jim and his trappers will catch it, and keep it alive while they study.

But here, the zoo wasn't large. The life on Methane II was simple, primitive, and almost unbelievably lacking in variety. Jim had had to content himself with a few reptile-like forms, several almost-fish, worms, and a fair sampling of mollusks. In the air, nothing flew. The vegetation was primitive. The stretches of low jungle consisted of nothing more complex than horsetail rushes and an occasional patch of giant clubmosses. What appeared to be grass, wasn't. A sward of low flat lichens carpeted the open spaces.

But there was one specimen that gave the lie to the primitive feel and appearance of Methane II. We hadn't decided what to call it; how to classify it. It had been found wandering along the edge of a horsetail patch, happily chewing tender shoots and gurgling and singing to itself. Peters' field men hadn't frightened it. It didn't struggle when they brought it in and housed it in one of the pens near the ship. It had eaten the vegetation provided, and flopped contentedly around the enclosure on its flipper-like appendages. And it had fascinated Lindy.

"Roscoe," my wife had said, "this little fellow represents the *real* Methane II. He doesn't look it, and he certainly doesn't act it, but he's far more advanced than anything else Jim has found. Even you haven't seen anything like him."

Lindy was always a diplomat. She was careful to make me feel special, even though the collecting of animals is not my concern. I'm the *Stardust's* ecologist. They say I'm pretty good at that.

Well, I hadn't found a creature, but I had found a stone club and heard a disembodied laugh. For a moment I had forgotten the club. I went back for it. It was remarkable enough of itself, and I knew Pegleg Williams would drool over it.

The club was not there. I remembered the exact boulder against which I had leaned it, but I searched the whole

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vicinity and there was no sign of it, or of what could have taken it. I knew, though. The artifact had belonged to whatever had voiced that giggle among the rocks.

I spoke aloud once more.

"The laugh's on me. I'll put it in the report — but how could anything swipe an object that size right from under my nose? And where did it go?" I faced the boulder scatter. "Come on. Laugh again. I dare you."

But there wasn't a sound. Whoever or whatever was playing games had decided to quit. So I made my way down the boulder field. As a precaution, I carried the laser in my hand.

Lindy was leaning against the plastic mesh of one of the zoo's enclosures, graceful, sturdy, her red curls glinting in the last rays of the sun Methane. As I approached, she reached out a hand to me.

"Gerald's asleep," she said. "I tired him out. He's just like a baby, and he's learning so many new things."

I put my arm around her shoulders.

"A strange-looking baby. Looks like a big lumpy bag of rubbish, rolled up in a ball like that. I shouldn't think his learning would be on a very high level. What tricks have you taught him?"

Lindy looked at me gravely.

"Gerald," she said, "is a very intelligent beastie. In fact, I don't think of him as an animal at all. He's a person. Squabby, blunderfooted, but *understanding*. He's learning. English."

"Gerald?"

Lindy giggled.

"It fits so beautifully. Let your mind go back. Back more than a century. Remember a famous public figure who continually tripped over his own feet, bumped his head at every possible opportunity, even tumbled down flights of stairs? I see you do. Well?"

I shook my head.

"I don't get it."

"You will. So-o — the only possible name for this little guy was Gerald. He already knows it, too. He tries to mumble it."

I looked at my wife's beautiful, interested face. She is, without any doubt, the ultimate in Galactic microbiologists, but her concern and sympathy for strange animal life-forms are really what make her unique. On all the life planets we have known, I've yet to see her fail to make friends. Everything likes her.

"My dear," I said patronizingly, "this time I think you're imagining. You're over-reaching. That's an aquatic animal, no brighter than a seal, and not nearly as graceful. And it eats vegetation like a manatee. You can't teach it to talk."

By now, you'd think that I'd know better. Lindy's green eyes sparkled, and her perfect lips compressed and thinned for a moment. But fortunately, she likes me too. The little flash of anger passed. She didn't drop the subject, though. She destroyed my complacent attitude with facts.

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"Roscoe," she said seriously, "Gerald is a key. He's important. I don't have to teach him to talk. He already has speech. I said I was teaching him English. Those blubber lips don't enunciate very well, but we're communicating. Soon he'll tell me things about this world."

I waited, and held my peace. She wasn't finished.

"We've assumed that those flippers meant water habitat, but it isn't so. I had one of the zoologists put him in a tank and he nearly drowned." She grinned at me. "The man was the villain, and Gerald was pathetically grateful to me for pulling him out. He doesn't even *like* water."

"I am humbled," I said. "I spoke without knowing. What else have you found out — in your spare time?"

"What I have left are mostly ideas," Lindy admitted. "I recommend them to you just the same." She ticked off her points on slender fingers.

"First, I think Gerald is an unfinished, an immature stage of something. In the two weeks we've had him his foreflippers have changed. He tries to grasp with them. They're not swimming structures.

"Second, but supporting my first point, his diet needs are changing. He still eats horsetails like the pig he reminds you of, but I noticed him looking longingly at those turtle forms Jim has near his pen. They're fed fish. I had an idea. So I offered Gerald a small piece of beef. Roscoe, he loved it. Didn't hurt him, either. Next day he was back at the fence, begging for more."

"How could you tell?"

"Because," my wife said smugly, "I had taught him to say 'beef'."

"I won't touch that. Any more thoughts?"

"Just one," Lindy said. "Roscoe, I think Jim should turn Gerald loose. He's a baby, and something was taking care of him. I'm sure he's an aware being. That means that holding him is against the basic ruling of the International Space Council. It almost means that his parents and friends may organize a protest, or even a rescue party when we least expect it."

"Have you spoken to Johnny?"

Lindy shook her head.

"Jim would come first. I don't want to be regarded as a meddler. And either would want more facts than I have."

"Jim Peters would welcome anything you have to say. You know that. He's not just a trapper and zoo-keeper. He's the sharpest and most understanding population analyst I ever saw perform."

"I know it," Lindy said. "He may have figured out most of this for himself. — But I'll talk to him."

As it happened, she never got the chance.

Our awarenesses were further sharpened when other field parties came in that evening. New facts suddenly piled up. It was as if the scales

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were falling from our eyes and we were seeing a world far more complex than our first impressions had led us to believe. Almost every party had experienced something new and significant.

"Ever tip over a bee-hive, Roscoe? Ever step on a yellow-jacket's nest and have the little varmints come boiling up out of the ground, each one with a poison sting? That's the way it felt to me out there today."

"What did you see?"

Pegleg Williams sipped. He was lounging back in the easy chair in my lab, cuddling a beaker of my best bourbon in both hands. He likes it straight, warm, and thinks a chaser is evidence of degeneracy. Pegleg's our geologist — the only Galactic geologist who exists. He had just come in.

"Nothing. But I'll give you odds that many a critter saw me. Not the low level forms we've been seeing all the time, either. I felt menace in the air. Something we've done has stirred up life we can't even know about."

A thought occurred to me. Pegleg would have been working in the outcrops and rock slides, doing the preliminary specimen taking that is routine with him.

"You may not have seen anything," I remarked, "but what about sound? Didn't hear noises up there in your little playground, did you? Small chirps and giggles, maybe? Sort of like a baritone Lindy?"

Pegleg halted his bourbon glass when it was almost at his mouth. His pale eyes looked at me queerly over the rim. Then he deliberately wet his lips with the nectar, ran out his tongue to savor a drop that escaped. He sighed.

"Roscoe," he said, "you're a good man. I thought I was hearing things in my head."

I told him about the club.

"You were chipping stone," I said. "I'll guess that you were being watched, and that what you were doing puzzled them. They work in stone themselves. That club was a neat job."

Pegleg finished his bourbon and reluctantly left the comfort of the chair.

"Unlucky me. An amateur discovers what a good rock man could make use of. If you find another one — well, now you know what I want for my birthday." He stood and thought for a minute. "Roscoe, all this is just now showing up. We can't be the only ones who're hearing things. Let's check around."

"Ursula," I said.

"Naturally," Pegleg grinned. "And Jim Peters' collectors, and the botanists — and I'll look over the map boys' low level pics from the scoutboats. Sometimes their blowups show all sorts of interesting things."

After he had gone I took possession of the easy chair and leaned back, thinking. Something certainly had triggered that outbreak of sound. Something had suddenly changed this placid, low level horsetail world into one considerably more dynamic.

I spent the evening alone in my

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quarters. Lindy was running tests, and stayed in her lab. I saw no more of Pegleg, but I knew he was busy. His curiosity was challenged. He wouldn't leave the problem now until he was satisfied. And late in the evening we all got more to think about.

My intercom growled, and the light pattern on it flashed to general alert.

"Attention, all personnel." Stony Price's voice sounded more serious than it usually does. "Missing person alert. Dr. James Peters has not returned to the ship. His communicator wave length does not answer. As a precaution, two search squads have already gone out toward the area where he was last seen. He is believed to have been climbing. Anyone who has any information about Dr. Peters' movements today is asked to check with Dr. Rasmussen."

After a few minutes the communicator blinked again, and Pegleg's voice came from the speaker.

"Still up, Roscoe? I've got something here you ought to see. It may be a clue about Jim."

"If it's portable, bring it around." I was sleepy, but disturbed about the general alert, even though I had been expecting something to happen.

Pegleg's knock sounded promptly. I punched the lock release button. Pegleg limped in, unrolling a big sheet of photographic paper as he came.

"Take a look," he said.

He had something, all right. The sheet was a blowup of a frame from a scoutboat survey roll, in living color, and at first glance seemed to be just one more shot down on the endless stretches of small ponds and the intervening green of horsetail jungles. Pegleg pointed.

"I've spent the evening running these things through the ampliprojector. Finally, I hit this. Pay dirt, I think."

I agreed. It wasn't at all what I expected, but Lindy would have found it especially interesting. Spread out along the edge of a stretch of lush horsetail growth were dozens, scores of small brown figures, each busily engaged in stuffing itself with greenery. A herd. A feeding herd. The animals were familiar, and they were all exactly alike.

"Geralds!" I said. "Hundreds of the little varmints. And we've seen only one before."

"There are more," Pegleg said. "After I recognized one group, I found several. The map boys were only looking at terrain and overlooked them entirely. So they're my own discovery."

We studied the picture for a while and ruminated.

"We ought to have seen them any number of times," Pegleg said. "*You* should have found the evidences of browsing, the trampled mud flats, flipper tracks all over the place. Why haven't you?"

"Partly because I haven't looked," I admitted. "I've spent more time among the rocks. But I've done plenty of scanning from heights, with binoculars.

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You know how I work. If I had seen anything unusual, I'd have checked it out. I just goofed, that's all."

"Forgiven," Pegleg said generously. "We can't all be perfect. But I'll bet Jim and his trappers had found things. That may be why he's not in our midst tonight. Opinion?"

"Possibly," I conceded. "Even likely. But the geralds didn't do him in. They're gentle, simple creatures, if our specimen is a sample."

"I agree." Pegleg leaned back in his chair and flexed his plastic knee. That usually indicated deep thought. But the thought, when it came, didn't seem too profound to me.

"I know it's late, Roscoe, but you wouldn't have a little of that bourbon handy, now would you. Just a dollop?"

I got a bottle and a glass. On second thought, I had a thimbleful myself.

"Where did they go? That's a lot of flesh just to vanish like they did. Into the ponds? I vote for that, I think. They're evidently adapted for a water habitat." Pegleg took a satisfying sip from his glass.

"You stick to rocks," I advised. "Those creatures don't even like water." I told him of Lindy's experiment with Gerald, and her conclusions. "She's got a knack with this sort of thing," I reminded him. "Sometimes I can't follow her reasoning, but it usually pans out."

"Oh, I agree," Pegleg said. "She's smarter by accident than you are on purpose. If she says no water, I'll go along. But they still went somewhere."

"I was looking for something in the picture that I didn't see," I said slowly. "Pegleg, I don't think those creatures were there of their own volition. Something brought them there — and took them away. I was looking for a herdsman, or something that would do the same job. And there's not a sign."

"They still didn't vanish," Pegleg said stubbornly. "They're numerous and tangible and solid and occupy space. They still occupy space, and I want to know where."

As the level in his glass went down, he became more verbose. Then he had a refill, and I had a drop more. When Lindy came in an hour later we were arguing cheerfully, but the thread of the talk was a bit hard to follow, and we were not too clear as to what the topic was. Needless to say, we didn't reach any conclusions.

Still, by courtesy of the bourbon I slept well. My subconscious had been on the job, for several things seemed obvious as I put my thoughts together over breakfast.

By the time I finished my coffee I was reasonably sure of two facts. First, the disappearance of Jim Peters was associated with the appearance and vanishing of the herds of geralds. Second, if we could find out where the herds went, it was more than likely we'd at least get some clues about our missing researcher. I didn't think the geralds

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were responsible. It wasn't reasonable that they'd know that our chief zoologist had put their buddy in a pen. Our Gerald was a simple, trusting creature. The ones in the picture looked exactly like him.

I punched my communicator button. In a moment the green indicator showed and blinked.

"Price."

"Roscoe, Stony. What's the status of the search?"

"Nothing all-out yet, Roscoe. Jim's still in the misplaced category. He was seen yesterday afternoon, headed along that rocky ridge to the north. He was making a jumper survey for a possible study area, and covering a lot of ground. His communicator went out about 1900 hours. One team of his boys is in the area, George Wildcat in charge. If he's there, they'll find him."

"If he's there. Who else is out?"

"Two scoutboats are roving. They'll cover extreme jumper range, and take a photo blanket. The usual."

"Hum-m!" I thought a moment. "Stony, they won't find him, because he's not there. Let me speak to the chief."

The communicator buzzed. Finally it blinked green again.

"Rasmussen, Roscoe. Mr. Price says you have an idea."

Dr. Johannes Rasmussen, the *Stardusts's* commander, is a grave, meticulous Victorian gentleman. Poise and correct behavior are everything with him. You'd never pick him to command a starship. But we know better. Even the matchless genius of Moe Cheng, the strange little man who plots our Ultraspan courses among the stars, and the unimaginative, stolid competence of Cap'n Jules Griffin, who implements them, both look with respect at Johnny Rasmussen. None of us could do his job as he does.

"Not an idea," I said now. "A fact."

"I would welcome one. They are in short supply. I have just spoken to George Wildcat and he says that Dr. Peters' trail has vanished. The rocky country makes tracking hard, but that has never stopped the Wildcat. He says there's nothing there. Nothing. I've never before heard him frustrated."

"He's right," I said. "That's my fact."

The communicator hummed softly while the chief simply waited. I had made a statement. I still had the floor.

So I explained. I told him about the herds of geralds Pegleg had found in the mapping pics. I pointed out that a short time later there were none there. The marks of their browsing, the crushed and broken horsetails in patches of considerable size showed plainly in the last pictures taken.

"They don't go into the water. They're not among the rocks. Hundreds of them can get out of sight fast. So there's only one place for them to go. Underground. Under the planet's crust."

I let Johnny wait then. It was his turn. And finally he spoke.

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"A good hypothesis, Roscoe — with a number of practical objections. The main one is that for a large number of creatures to go out of sight quickly, there would have to be large entrances and exits. They would be obvious even to you and me. To the Wildcat they would be conspicuous. And he has seen nothing."

"I know," I said. "He has looked for the wrong things in the wrong places. He has undoubtedly seen what we need to know, but hasn't recognized it.

"I'm not sure," I admitted. "I plan to try, though. Johnny, the beings we're concerned with are not the geralds. Those are simple creatures, though Lindy insists they're intelligent. But they're being herded, grazed and driven by something with much higher competencies. Those entrances to an underground world exist, but they're not conspicuous. They're sophisticated, and perfectly camouflaged. Guided, the Wildcat can find them. I think I can show him how to look."

The communicator blinked and hummed. Rasmussen was checking my points with that methodical thoroughness.

"You are assuming," he said, "that Dr. Peters has been abducted into this speculative nether world by a creature or creatures unknown?"

"Nothing specific like that. He could have followed them in. He may have watched them activate an entrance, and then done it later on his own. *I* don't know. But, whether by fair means or foul, I think that's where he is."

Rasmussen sighed.

"Very well, Roscoe, keep in touch. I'll have scoutboats overhead, but high, so they won't interfere. Good luck."

"Thanks," I said. "I'll take Pegleg, if he's in any shape to travel. After all, the geralds are his discovery."

The communicator blinked, then went dead.

Half an hour later Pegleg and I stood on a jumper platform, forty feet above the waving sea of horsetails. We had a good view of the pond-spotted green land. The long rugged ridge of rock uplift knifed across it, and stretch away into distance to the north. We lounged in our jumper frames for a couple of minutes, orienting. Pegleg pointed.

"The one familiar thing in an alien world, Roscoe. Something to depend on. As long as I can see that, I know we're still in business."

It was, of course, Ursula Potts' red umbrella. It made a bright splash about a mile away, where the old girl had set up her easel and chair at the foot of a rock slide. The binoculars showed her daubing away busily.

"If our errand makes any sense, she could be in danger there," I said. "If they'd snatch one of us, why not another?"

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Pegleg shook his head.

"Not Ursula. They wouldn't dare, and I don't even know who 'they' are. Anyhow, she'd sense something out of line. If she were threatened, she wouldn't be there. She's a witch, remember?"

"Maybe," I said dubiously, "but let's stop by and mention it, just the same."

We launched from the platform in high arcs, and dropped gently into the horsetails fifty yards from the ship. On contact each jumper blasted again and we soared, leap by leap, to where Ursula sat painting. We landed easily and lightly, but of course she heard us. She didn't look up.

We left our jumper frames and strolled up behind her. Ordinarily, this is taboo. No one looks at Ursula's paintings until they are finished. But we're special. Out of a crew of more than four hundred people, Ursula's friends number scarcely more than half a dozen. All respect her. Many are afraid of her. But she knows that only a few of us can see past the grim facade of bony, wizened face, pale cold eyes and thin blue lips which she turns on her environment. We see a lonely old woman, grateful for friendship, who just happens also to be one of the great geniuses of the Galaxy. Without her painted analyses we would learn far less than we do.

So we stared over her shoulder and were promptly hooked by what we saw. It was a fair-sized canvas, and on it Ursula had almost completed a portrait. Silently we studied it. We recognized that it was what we had been looking for — and it was not quite believable.

A strange, man-like being stood alone among the rocks, with a long, sinuous, graceful body mottled red and blue, short muscular legs, large splayed feet, and great misshapen hands grasping a rude stone club. Its head was not human, but the features were comparably located. It had large, bulbous, luminous eyes, a blob for a nose, but with paired nostrils. Its ears were enormous, leaf-like, thin and with a curiously scalloped margin. In the portrait one ear was directed forward, the other back. Evidently they were readily and individually movable. There was a wide mouth, with loose blubbery lips. Altogether an amazing looking thing. Yet somehow it reminded me vaguely of something I had seen before.

Ursula allowed us a few minutes to look, then turned, a sour expression on her face. I spoke quickly.

"We've prowled and hunted and observed, Ursula, and haven't had a whisper of anything like that. You haven't actually seen it, have you?"

Ursula nodded emphatically.

"Posed for me," she said.

"You mean that that thing was close enough for you to see this much detail, and you just sat and painted?"

"Why not? My job, isn't it? What it was there for, anyway."

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That called for some thinking. Ursula didn't talk at random. When she made a statement, I knew better than to brush it off.

"You're saying, I think, that it knew what you were doing and that it meant to be seen. But just by you. Where did it come from?"

"No idea. Just looked up and there it was."

"Hum-m. How long did it stay?"

"Few minutes. Long enough."

"Then you saw it go. Where?"

Ursula grinned. She was enjoying herself. She'd tell us everything, but in her own time.

"Didn't. Looked down at my sketch, it was there. Looked up, it was gone. Evaporated. Like the vanishing cubes of Cyrene IV."

I looked at her in some exasperation. She took a fine brush from the bun of gray hair on the back of her head, picked up paint from the palette, and made a small improvement on the painting. Her face was smug.

"You don't believe that. It just had a way of hiding in a hurry. That rock pile is a jumble. You didn't look, I suppose."

"Your job," Ursula said scornfully. "*I* paint."

Well, I couldn't argue with that, so we left her doing it. We didn't search the rocks where her model had been. We'd have drawn a blank, and we knew it.

The best jumper country lay in the green flat lands, so we tapped and soared, tapped and soared, a mile every two or three minutes. We kept the rocky ridge in view. After twenty miles or so we veered in again to the rough country. High above us, a speck in the slightly reddened sky, a scoutboat cruised in slow circles.

I flipped my communicator switch.

"Calling Wildcat! Calling Wildcat! Come in, George."

The communicator simply continued to hum, so I set the beeper, and Pegleg and I took a breather. Probably the Wildcat was away from his jumper and up in the boulder fields. The beeper would call him.

A number of minutes passed. Then the communicator changed tone, crackled and cleared its throat. But it was not the Wildcat who spoke.

"Jubal."

"Kissinger, Jubal. Isn't this the Wildcat's signal?"

The soft chuckle that always preceded the African's speech came mellowly.

"Right, Dr. Kissinger. The Wildcat is half a mile up the slope, studying a trail. I have him in view. Shall I try to patch him in? He has his belt set."

"No, you tell me."

"We have been blind," Jubal said. "We now know where Dr. Peters has gone, but it hasn't helped us any. There's a trail up from the edge of the horsetail jungle that could have been made by an elephant herd. Dr. Peters took that trail. But a short distance into the rocks it frazzles out like the end

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of a rope — and vanishes. There's nothing there."

"We know," I said. "Dr. Williams and I figured that out last night. We know what made the trail. But where'd they go, Jubal? And how? Magic? Voodoo?"

The African's chuckle came again. His crisp English accent and perfect diction put my slovenly speech to shame.

"I haven't even an inkling, Dr. Kissinger. And as for voodoo — I am far removed from my roots. But you might query Miss Potts."

"We have," I said, "and she helped, too. She filled in one more empty space. Give us a beam, Jubal. We're probably only three or four miles away."

We shortened our jumps and picked our way along a succession of boulder fields. The signal strengthened. Then we topped a rocky ridge and dropped down onto the slope where the trackers were working. We landed beside the Wildcat.

George Wildcat's ancestors had followed the buffalo along the eastern front of Earth's Rocky Mountains for a thousand generations. This quiet young man had brought all their wisdom with him into space, and onto worlds they could not possibly have imagined. In my view, he is the finest tracker in the Galaxy.

"So you've met your match, Wildcat," I said. "They've out-witted you."

The grave face of the Sioux didn't change, but his brown eyes looked amused.

"Not I, Dr. Kissinger. You," the Wildcat said. "The problem is no longer one of trailing. It's technological. We know where they went. We think Dr. Peters followed them. They didn't vanish, either. They went into the rocks, but the boulder field is normal. So *you* will have to find out how they did it. Out of my area of competence."

"I'm an ecologist, not a blinking mechanic," I growled. "Dr. Williams knows about rocks. Let's pass the buck to him."

"Has nothing to do with rocks." Pegleg's disclaimer was as positive as ours. "They just lie there. So I'm nothing but a spectator."

But in none of those statements was he entirely correct.

We bump-rocked our jumpers to the foot of the slope. The Wildcat glided down after us. Then the four of us held a brief conference, after which I called Johnny Rasmussen. Stony Price relayed me through. I brought the chief up to date on such facts as we had, and proposed further action.

"This is where the biggest herd of geralds vanished, and where Jim's trail disappeared. They go together, Johnny. No doubt at all of that. Pegleg and I would like to stay here and watch. We suggest that Jubal and the Wildcat check out the other gerald herds we saw on the pics. They've done all they can here. Agree?"

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"You're on the ground, Roscoe. You'd know better than I. I'll maintain the eyes overhead, and high. And Roscoe," Rasmussen's voice lost its precise coldness for a moment, "keep in touch! Out!"

When the trackers' jumpers had soared away toward the flatland, Pegleg and I settled down to observe. But after a brief while Pegleg bestirred himself restlessly.

"Might as well take some samples. If there's going to be anything to see, I doubt that a little chipping will change things. Maybe it'll help. As you said, they're rock 'men'."

He took his hammer and rock bag, draped his jacket and even his laser gun over his jumper frame.

"I'll just clamber about for a while, It'll keep me awake. If you see anything, yell."

I nodded. Sitting and watching is one of my prime study methods. I do it automatically. And with Pegleg a moving figure up the slope, I had something to relate to. I could hear his hammer tinking away industriously even when I stared back down the conspicuous spoor of the geralds. Then Pegleg's call came.

"I've got a fact, Roscoe. A funny, funny fact. Get up here and confirm it."

I groaned.

"I'll believe you," I yelled back. "Make a note!"

"Up, dammit! This'll really jar your eyes open!"

There was a tone in his voice that I recognized. Pegleg was excited. Still, mine was a considerable bulk to haul up that outsized rubble heap, tired as I still was. So I took off everything superfluous and hung my own jumper with jacket and equipment.

Pegleg was rolling stones, and I opened my mouth to protest. Only a fool rolls rocks when there's anyone below him on a rock slide. But I never got out a sound, for by that time I was close enough to see everything. He was rolling rocks all right, picking up stones as large as my head and casting them down the slope. But they weren't going far. As soon as they hit the ground they slowed, stopped, and then *rolled back up the slope* by themselves. Apparently they plopped themselves back each into the exact spot it had occupied before.

"Even if I had made a note, would you have believed it?"

"I'm not sure I believe it anyway."

I picked up a small stone and tossed it. It bounded away down the slope in an expected, normal fashion. I looked up at Pegleg, thirty feet farther along.

"There's a catch to this. What are you doing to them?"

"It's a matter of location," Pegleg said. "Where you're standing, I can see where the geralds rucked things up. You're on the trail. Here, nothing. This high, the slope heals itself. It shows no evidence that anything has passed."

"Ridiculous."

I climbed on up, and when I reach-

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ed an invisible line, each stone my feet tilted, each pebble I dislodged, rolled back into the exact position it had occupied before. I've always been awkward in loose rock, but I left no spoor at all.

"Neat, eh? Ingenius. And I think I know what they're doing, though I can't imagine how."

Pegleg swung his rock hammer and expertly chipped a bit from a boulder. He pointed to the raw fracture.

"Lots of iron in these," he said. "I'm even tempted to say magnetism, which makes no sense at all. But we're in a strong energy field of some sort. It isn't uniform, either. In some fashion it is being infinitely varied. And the rocks don't cling. It's not hard to lift them. They just return."

"Power sources," I said. "Generators. *And* intelligences to produce and control them. And here we stand babbling as if the whole thing were a philosophical point. Suddenly I want a laser in my hand and Johnny on the communicator. Let's get down to the jumpers!"

It was a good thought, but it was late.

They were all around us. It seemed like a horde, but when I counted them, mentally and then aloud, there were only six. They were almost exactly alike, and each could have posed for Ursula's portrait. Each swung a heavy stone club back and forth gently. The unhuman faces were expressionless. The bulging, bulb-like eyes were fixed intently on us, but the great leaf-like ears, bat-wing thin, swiveled and turned endlessly.

"We never learn, Roscoe," Pegleg said sadly. "Any fool would have known they were here somewhere."

"That let's us out," I said in disgust. "We're not fools. We're sloppy and careless — and we *were* sleepy. I think I'm waked up now."

My hand had automatically dropped to where my laser should have been — but it was hanging on my jumper in plain sight down the slope. My only possible weapon was the sheath knife on my belt. Pegleg had his rock hammer. Not very encouraging when we looked at the stone bludgeons held in gnarled, lumpy hands twice the size of mine. Definitely, arbitration was the only answer to our situation. And I hadn't an idea how to go about it.

"Palaver with them," Pegleg suggested. "You claim to be good at that sort of thing. The worst they can get us for is trespass, anyhow. We haven't done anything."

When we're in a jam we think better while we talk, but behind the words we were groping frantically. Our scoutboat eye was a mere speck in the sky. I knew my belt communicator wouldn't reach it, but I flipped the switch anyway. The huge hand of the creature nearest me reached over and flipped it back. The strange faces did

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not change, but from each pair of blubbery lips sounds came out, high, chortling, giggly sounds. They were the sounds I had heard when I found the club. They blended into a chilling, mechanical sort of mirth, a ghoulish sound-track of laughter.

"They know, boy," Pegleg said. "In spite of the clubs and the informal attire, they recognize technical and mechanical equipment. They probably don't know what it does, but they savvy it does something. So they're reminding you not to use it."

"That giggling," I muttered, "could get very old. I suppose it's just a happen-so that it sounds like laughter, for I doubt they're amused. They don't look it."

"It varies," Pegleg said. "It could well be speech, or at least a way of communicating."

"If so, they all talk at once. I think I'll try something."

I faced the creature nearest me, stared hard into his bulbous eyes and began to laugh. At first I just spread my mouth in a wide grin, let the sound become audible as deep chuckles, and finally I threw back my head and roared. I'm not much of an actor and it probably sounded pretty phony, but I doubted that they could tell the difference. I tapered off with giggles as close to theirs as I could manage. Then I stood, deadpan, and slowly looked at each being in turn.

Since each face had no more expression than a salamander, I couldn't tell what effect, if any, my performance had had. I got action, though.

One of the beings turned, shoved his belly side against a high boulder, and placed his misshapen arms around it as far as they would go. I couldn't see anything move, but he must have been putting a twist or a torque on the rock. A few feet up the slope small rocks and gravel and sand began to shift away from what quickly became a seam in the rubble. A whole section of the rock underneath lifted slowly.

"Ah," Pegleg said. "So that's how they do it. Biggest doorknob I ever *did* see."

The opening was wide enough to have accommodated Pegleg's jeep. Just beyond it a steep ramp sloped down into black depths. The creature nearest led the way, while the others shuffled around behind us to cut off any attempt to make a break for the transportation down the slope. They made unmistakable "after you" gestures.

I looked at Pegleg and saw what I expected to see. His narrow face was freaking into a grin of genuine anticipation. Pegleg's nuts. He loves it when things get really sticky. I shrugged.

"What choice have we got? Every time this happens I swear that if I get out I'm going into another line of work."

"But you never do," Pegleg said. "We wanted to find out where Jim Peters went, didn't we? Well, looks like we're going to. Let's not keep the

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gentlemen waiting. I'd hate to be booted down that black hole by those big flat feet."

He stepped off, and I followed. The ramp twisted downward like a giant corkscrew. Above us the outside light was blotted out as the opening slowly closed.

It wasn't entirely dark. In fact, I was glad I couldn't see any better, for the trail pitched downward at an impossible grade, and the view below, if there had been one, would probably have been pretty chilling. There was a dull reddish glow, coming from everywhere and nowhere, and it was enough to pick out the shadowy forms around me. I saw the reason for the big bulbous eyes.

"Visibility is probably pretty good to these characters, Roscoe. There's even virtue in being pop-eyed."

I shuffled along, letting my feet do most of the seeing.

"They adjust," I said. "They didn't seem unhappy outside, either."

After half an hour the red glow intensified. We could see well enough when the ramp spiraled out of the base of the cylinder and become a road, a well-traveled road of fine gravel, curving away across a shadowy landscape.

"I suppose you're noting the landmarks," Pegleg said, "or dropping bits of paper as we go along, so we can find our way back."

"I came away so suddenly," I apologized. "Hadn't time even to pack necessities."

"Yeah — like a laser, and maybe a magnaflash. My hand has never felt emptier. Roscoe, don't these creatures seem a little apprehensive to you, as if they're expecting trouble? Look at those ears. They never stop spinning, and I'll bet they're picking up disturbing sounds."

I'd noticed that. I'd also noticed that we were increasing our speed. The giggles came more frequently, but they were softer. Then suddenly we stopped. Our guards drew together into a tight circle around us, the great bat ears facing outward. They stretched and quivered. And after a few minutes they folded back against each mottled skull like fans. Special hearing wasn't needed any more. The sounds came from every direction, horrible, chilling laughter, as if someone had told a particularly nauseous joke. A wall of bodies rose out of the gloom and waved toward us. The creatures had been lying flat among and behind the stones that made up the terrain. It was an ambush, and our captors were outnumbered twenty to one.

A man-to-man club fight would have been something to see, for they all knew their weapons. But it wasn't to be. The clubs were also deadly when thrown. So each defender drew a shower of them before he came close enough to engage. Each even managed to parry or turn aside a club or two — but there were simply too many.

In a matter of minutes our captors had ceased to exist. We were surround-

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ed by a swarm of creatures exactly like them, with the same stone weapons and the same gruesome giggles. At first glance I couldn't have told the difference. But there was one.

"They know about us," I said. "Presumably they won't give us the club treatment as long as we behave ourselves. Notice that they avoid touching us? So did the others."

"That doesn't mean we've been freed from bondage," Pegleg said. "What it probably does mean is that we've got a longer trip ahead of us. This is a raiding party. They're not in their home range."

"Reasonable," I nodded. "Our original captors were in familiar surroundings. They use this area; take their geralds up that exit. They weren't expecting this."

"Especially the last part. Roscoe, are they doing what I think they're doing?"

They were, all right. And swiftly and efficiently, too. The raiders had knives, keen and broad and leaflike, and in a few minutes we would have never recognized our original captors. They had been eviscerated, butchered, and the steaks and chops, hams and ribs racks and miscellaneous fillets had been distributed among the members of the party. Only the offal and the heads were left.

The ears, the thin, bat-wing-like, folding ears, seemed to be prized trophies. They had been taken off close to the skull, and six of the victors wore a pair of them on their belt-like harnesses.

The creatures swirled about, but I soon saw that there was nothing aimless in what they did. The sound was continuous, with a mixed volume of giggles and chortles, and an occasional high-pitched laugh.

The bulbous eyes rolled at us again and again. We were an unexpected complication. But after a few minutes they seemed to resolve it. They spread out and began to march. We were in the middle, and the gestures made it plain that we had better march too. We were in no position to debate the point, so we marched.

"I think I liked the others better," Pegleg said, as we stumped along. "They had an air of refinement that these lack. Also, I have no evidence that they were cannibals."

"Don't bet on it." I was appreciating the fact that the creatures' flat feet made them travel at a comfortable pace. "There's a difference, though; a physical difference. Have you noticed?"

Pegleg nodded.

"Ears," he said. "I was just going to hit you with it. I saw it when they took such pains to cut the big fans off the dead skulls. They themselves don't grow trophies like that."

We studied the mottled heads bobbing along all around us. Instead of the batwing outgrowths of the first group, these had tiny, pointed appendages laid close to the skulls. Apparently

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they couldn't even move them. I looked closely to see if they had been surgically trimmed, but they seemed to be natural. They were all alike.

"Two races," I mused. "Evidently very closely related, but with one significant difference. Probably a difference each is proud of."

Pegleg looked at me quizzically. "Why?"

I shrugged, and stumbled over a rock.

"Does there have to be a reason? Pegleg, long ago we accepted the fact that any race of beings defends its uniqueness. It makes a virtue of what it can't change. That's not just an Earth characteristic. We've seen it on many worlds. We're seeing it here."

Pegleg chuckled. He sounded almost like one of the creatures who surrounded us.

"So-o — little ears are good. Big motile ears are an affectation, like powdered wigs and perfumed snuff. Big ears represent degeneracy — overspecialization — and everyone knows that this should be pruned out. Besides, they're a good source of meat."

"That last might well be first," I said. "In a land like this, what do the beings eat? Unless there are light areas, plants can't grow. Except for our friends here, nothing moves. They have to get their energy from the surface."

Pegleg snapped his fingers, and bulbous eyes turned toward him from all directions.

"The geralds! They raise 'em for food. They take them out in herds to browse on the greenery, then below the surface for safety."

It sounded reasonable, but somehow I couldn't buy it.

"Safety from what? If there were anything in the surface world that was danger to them, we'd know it by now. And down here things are rough. Better they should stay out there in the sun, where the living is easy. Uh-uh. Too many pieces missing."

"I tried," Pegleg said. "Let's stop worrying about how they survive, and give some thought to us. Objectivity is fine, but I'd like to survive too. With a laser in my hand I wouldn't have a doubt of it. Without, I feel a mite handicapped."

"On the same topic," I said, "do you think they'll bother to feed us? And if so, what? Could you eat a tender slice or two of our late guards? Probably uncooked, and without even salt?"

Even in the gloom Pegleg looked a little sick. But he kept the faith.

"If we can order what we want," he said, "I think I'll just have a salad."

I grinned, but I wasn't feeling very humorous. Behind the nonsense we each were realizing that our situation was genuinely grim.

A thought struck me.

"Pegleg! What *did* become of the meat?"

Each creature around us had both hands free. The clubs were their only

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burdens. We stared about us in the dim red light. I actually think Pegleg looked relieved.

"They didn't cache it and they certainly didn't eat it," I persisted. "It's gone, though. Where?"

"I wasn't keeping track of it," Pegleg said. "I won't miss it, either. But naturally, it's somewhere. It couldn't vanish."

There were at least a hundred beings in the band, and six carcasses had been parceled out among them. I guessed that no one had been left out. Each "man" had had a share. I hadn't watched the butchering closely, but the parcels wouldn't have been very large. And, as Pegleg said, they couldn't vanish. Ergo, they were still present.

I studied the creature striding along nearest me. He was naked, with a wide belt of what looked like thick leather around his waist, and a strap from it running up across his rounded chest and over one sloping shoulder. His knife, shaped almost like a leaf, and without a sheath, hung in a loop on the belt. A pair of the ears of our slaughtered captors was attached to the shoulder strap with a thong. And that was it. Or was it?

I looked closely at another one. I couldn't have told one from the other. There was a difference, though, and Pegleg pointed it out.

"Look at the bellies, Roscoe. Each man has a slightly different profile below the belt. The red and blue mottlings camouflage it, but there's a thin line across the front, with a bulge below it. Those varmints have skin pouches, and the openings are drawn tight. That's where the meat is, safe in their little built-in carrying cases. They may have all sorts of odds and ends in there."

Once called to the attention, the things were obvious enough. We weren't too surprised. We had found parallel development and modifications on world after world. By now, when the conditions were Earth-like, we expected Earth-like life, Earth-like variations. We weren't too often wrong.

"We've been saying 'he' automatically, but could these things be female? Have we been captured by a group of ladies?"

"If I see what I think I see, they're male all right," Pegleg said drily. "Marsupia don't have to be for the protection of young. Earth context doesn't have to apply."

"We'd be justified in thinking so," I insisted. "Maybe they're both."

Pegleg studied the beings around us for a few strides. He shook his head.

"My competence is rocks," he said. "I can't debate the point with you, but I hope you're wrong. Imagine having to remember a mama like that!"

I laughed aloud, and all around me the striding club-creatures took it up, as if they understood the joke.

The terrain was becoming more distinct, a rocky desert, with great

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boulders scattered over it. Except for our steadily striding party, it seemed a dead world.

Then that illusion was broken. We heard faint high twittering calls, and our captors stopped promptly. A ripple of giggles welled up softly for a minute. Then each creature lay flat, its body melded into the rocky floor, and the odd mottling of its skin coloring making it almost invisible. Those nearest us gestured emphatically. They didn't touch us, but they swung the clubs significantly. We flattened ourselves as directed. But we weren't camouflaged, we wore clothes, so we remained conspicuous. I lay on my back in a pebbly depression. I meant to see whatever there was to see.

The twittering grew louder. A flight of something swept out of the gloom on whistling wings, wheeled and zig-zagged overhead, and kept on going. I started to move, but the club-creatures still lay as if dead. They knew. In half a minute we heard more sounds and the flock was overhead again, this time much lower. They circled erratically, like bats, and the twittering was varied with squeals and little flute-like calls. But they certainly didn't look formidable.

Membrane-winged, with wide, staring eyes, furry bodies and slender, trailing tails, they seemed to be patched together from spare parts. Still, I don't doubt that they were uniquely fitted for whatever niche they occupied in this unlikely world. They were agile on the wing, and they were definitely watching our party. But I couldn't understand the short ears' concern. The things were no larger than crows.

They darted and criss-crossed lower and lower, then suddenly, with a chorus of high-pitched notes, they swept away in the direction from which they had come.

The short ears rolled to their flat feet. They beckoned to us, then set off almost at a run, and after a few moments the band broke up. They began to scatter in all directions. Four stayed with us. But even they showed impatience to be gone.

A big pile of rocks showed in the middle distance, and I soon saw that this was our destination — or at least was a landmark of some sort. Since the horizon was close, all distances were foreshortened. We reached the rock heap in a few minutes. Our guards gestured toward it, indicating that we were to stay there. Then they left us, each setting off in a different direction.

"Well!" Pegleg made himself comfortable on a convenient boulder, looked quizzical, flexed his plastic knee and said it again. "Well!" It was a familiar reaction.

"Eloquent, as usual," I said. "Are we any better off? We no longer have company, but we don't have anything else, either. No food, no water, no guns, and no faint idea of where we are."

The short ears must have assumed that we'd look around. At any rate,

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they hadn't waited to show us what was quickly obvious. The rock pile was not only artificial; it was not, strictly speaking, a rock pile at all. It was a building, and a pretty extensive one at that. Halfway around its base I came to the entrance. It simply looked like a cave opening; no door, just a dark, irregular space. I called to Pegleg.

"Your home away from home," I said. "The short ears expect us to hole up here until the crisis, whatever it is, is past. I therefore assume that there's nothing injurious to my health in there, but I thought you ought to know I'm going in."

Pegleg studied the opening.

"What a blessing a magnaflash would be," he mused. "Even an old-fashioned torch would be welcome. But we have no fire, and nothing that would burn. So lead on. What's one black hole more or less?"

He slipped his rock hammer from his belt and swished it back and forth. I grinned, and drew my knife.

"Maybe this is justice. We usually are so well equipped that the opposition doesn't have a chance. This time the locals get a break. If there's a fight, and we win, we'll earn it."

"I liked it better the old way — lopsided in my favor," Pegleg sighed. "But man doesn't always get what he wants in this Galaxy. Let's go!"

But the inside was a pleasant surprise. The entrance fed into a corridor along the wall for eight or ten strides, which opened in turn into a vaulted room of considerable size.

There was light, a warm yellow radiance that seemed to come from several glowing spots high on the walls. Why they glowed we couldn't see. And there was water, a small bright runnel of it that bubbled out of the floor halfway down the length of the chamber. It collected in a little basin clearly artificial, then ran along the wall for a few feet and gurgled down a drain.

I was dry, but I tasted it gingerly. It was cold and sweet.

"Very nice," I remarked. "Light, comfortable, and out of the weather. I doubt that this is a short ear establishment, but they know about it. If there was food, now—"

"What weather?" Pegleg interrupted. "No matter what it seems like, this so-called world is nothing but a big cave. I doubt if conditions outside ever vary at all. How could they?"

"A *very* big cave," I said. "Perhaps stretching hundreds of miles. Somehow 'cave' isn't quite the word for an underground space that extensive. It is the living space for four races of living things that we know of, and probably any number more. Physical conditions could change, too, if the dominant races had a technology that could manage it. I already suspect that they have. So maybe there is weather."

Pegleg had a drink, sipping directly from the little pool.

"You're the thinker," he said, his

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chin dripping. "I just record facts. And so far, *I'm* lost in a *cave* with a bunch of neanderthal-level varmints that eat each other."

"They built this room, piped in good water, have an energy source that produces good light. They built the cylinder and the ramp down from the surface. They made the rocks roll uphill. And that's just for starters. Pegleg, I don't want to go back to the *Stardust* yet."

"Your chances of going being pretty remote, that's the proper attitude," Pegleg said drily. He glanced around. "I suppose we'll all die sooner or later, but right now I'd hate to die hungry."

He went poking along the irregular wall of the room, even tapping at spots with his rock hammer. It seemed like a good idea, so I started down the other side. Then I heard Pegleg say "Ah!".

He had detatched what seemed to be a whole segment of the wall, a slab of thin rock that he lifted down and set aside. He grinned across at me.

"Here are the rations, Roscoe. This is sort of a rest stop, so I knew there had to be some. Whether we'll want to eat 'em, after what we've seen, is another thing."

He had removed a door covering a series of rock shelves in the wall. On a couple of them were stacks of thin, disc-like cakes almost as wide across as my handspan. They were evidently food. A good fresh odor came from them, although the first visual impression was not good. They were a nauseating shade of green.

"Anyhow, they're not meat." Pegleg picked one up and smelled it. "Fresh, too. At first glance I was afraid they were moldy."

"Specialty of the house," I said. "Methane wafers. Pegleg, I'm going to try one of these, if it's my last act. I'm hungry."

"In your case, not unusual." Pegleg beat me to it, taking a modest bite from the cake in his hand. He chewed gingerly, rolling the stuff on his tongue. His mouth promptly became green.

"Not bad. Nutty. Crisp. Probably chock full of vitamins and minerals."

I tried one myself. It was as reported, fresh and flavorful. Actually tasty.

"Dehydrated plant materials, several sorts, mixed with ground up seeds, kinds unspecified, molded into cakes and baked." I chewed and analysed. "Still think they're neanderthal level?"

"I never did." Pegleg began another wafer. "I just like to hear you talk me out of it. It keeps you thinking — and sometimes we both learn something."

When we decide to take chances, we go all out. So we each made a full meal, had another drink from the basin, then stretched out on the stone floor and slept. As I went under I reflected rather wryly that it was lack of sleep that had put us in this particular predicament in the first place.

When we finally came out of it, we

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were not alone. Before I opened my eyes I could hear them moving about, their bare feet whispering on the stone. There were soft chuckles and giggles, deliberately muted. They were letting us finish our naps.

I sneaked a peek through slitted lids, then opened my eyes wide. These were not small ears. We had changed hands again. A muscular big ear, the brilliant red and blue mottling on his hide intensified by the better light, sat on a stone near me. His bulbous eyes were studying me intently. I sat up, and he voiced a loud chuckle. He had several friends in the room. They rallied around promptly, giggling as though he had just made a mildly funny remark. But the doughy faces showed no expression. The blubber lips on the wide mouths barely moved to let the sounds come through. It was weird.

Pegleg rose on an elbow, assessed the situation and grinned.

The food cabinet was open as we had left it, and several of the creatures had cakes in their big hands. When I stood up and stretched, taking my time, one of them motioned toward the food.

"Thank you," I said. "I don't mind if I do."

They gave us time to eat, watching intently as we took bites, chewed and swallowed. They commented humorously among themselves. When we finished, and after we drank from the basin, one of them closed the cupboard and they waved us toward the exit.

Out in the gloomy perpetual twilight again, our squad of big ears deployed around us, shuffling awkwardly along and swinging their stone clubs exactly like their short eared counterparts.

"I feel a little better with these," I said. "This is the edge of their home range, I think. They're doubtless responsible for the rest station back there. Of course, they may have a bone to pick with us about swiping Gerald."

"Better than being bush-whacked by the other types," Pegleg agreed. "The next batch might just add us to the meat pile."

"If they do, I hope I'm tough."

We hadn't gone a mile when our escort suddenly broke stride, clumped closely around us, the bat-wing ears swiveling like antennae.

"Ah me?" Pegleg said. "Looks like it's still no-man's-land after all. They've picked up something."

In a moment we could hear it ourselves. It was familiar, the high-pitched trilling that had sent the short ears to ground. In another minute we detected the wing whistles, and the bat-like, rat-like fliers were swirling overhead. The big ears responded entirely differently. The leaf ears spread. They listened intently. Then a raucous, chortling chorus broke from them, and the flock whirled and darted away.

"Well, I'll be darned. They communicate. The flying rats are eyes

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overhead for the big ears. Roscoe, this almost beats rocks as entertainment."

"Don't go overboard," I cautioned. "It does look cooperative, but it's too pat, unless the flittermice get something out of it."

"Just the same, I wouldn't leave now if you showed me a ramp to the surface. Down here is where the action is."

It was that, all right. Our squad of big ears changed direction abruptly, and headed toward what seemed to be a low-lying ridge, emphasized at intervals by small hills. Even at the shuffling pace of our captors we were shortly in rough country. It was all harsh and barren beyond belief.

But the natives knew where they were and where they were going. They turned into a narrow fissure between two hills. The stone under our feet was polished and worn. Evidently this was a much-used passage.

A ripple of giggles ran along the marching line. All ears swiveled forward. Ahead we heard other chuckles, and our 'men' picked up their trail pace.

"Friend," I said. "Reinforcements. We are saved!"

Pegleg chuckled almost like a native.

"Saved from what? And for what? Roscoe, never before have I been in a situation where the line between friend and foe was so poorly drawn. I don't know which side I'm on. I don't know when to cheer."

"Resolution coming up!" I said. "We'll soon know who our friends are."

The fissure widened into a gloomy, room-like space. Waiting for us there was an impressive squad of big ears — and one short, roly-poly figure. This last came waddling toward me, making strange, bubbly noises that sounded almost like speech. The club men stood aside to let him come.

"Wosco," the creature gurgled. "Lindy Wosco! Good! Good!"

The words were mushy, barely recognizable, but they were words. The being knew me. And, of course, I knew him.

"It's Gerald! They've turned him loose. Lindy's sent him to find us."

The creature patted my leg with an awkward, flipper-like hand and looked up at me with trustful, bulging eyes.

"Ge'ald. Wosco. Lindy. Good!"

"Good, yes!" I said it and I meant it. "Lindy, where?"

"Lindy," Gerald said contentedly. The 'where' wasn't in his vocabulary. But he had found me, and he was pleased. He snuggled down at my feet and regarded me steadily. I returned the compliment. On forty worlds I had never seen anything like him, but a memory was stirring. I recalled Lindy's comment: "I think Gerald is an unfinished, an immature stage of something." And suddenly, looking down at the lumpy, dead-pan face, bulging eyes and blubber lips, I knew she was right. Gerald was simply a larval big

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ear, and already he was changing. His ears were becoming conspicuous, and they twitched as he stared. On his slaty hide patches of blue and red showed faintly, like watermarks. He would elongate, his flippers would become the great knobby hands that grasped the heavy stone clubs.

"Pegleg," I said, "he's a pup. A big ear pup. And he thinks Lindy's wonderful — and I think we're home free. We have a friend."

"Hum-m!" Pegleg looked thoughtfully from Gerald to the grotesque members of his guard band. "I thought they kept them in herds, like sheep. So what did we see in the horsetail photos? A Sunday School picnic?"

"No data. We may never know. But Gerald acts like a special pup. The big fellows stand aside for him."

Pegleg nodded.

"It fits. They snatched Jim Peters because we had their special pup. But it might have been any one of us. He was the first one they could catch."

"We're guessing. But it will serve until and if we get more facts. So now that they have Gerald back, full of good-will, they'll turn Jim loose. And us, of course."

"Of course." But Pegleg didn't look too sure.

Gerald's guards took charge of us. There were only a few of them, but they were elite; appreciably bigger and more muscular than any of the others we had seen. They directed their giggles at Gerald. He chortled in return, pulled at my hand with a flipper.

"Wosco," he said, and waddled up the trail. After a minute he looked back anxiously, to see if I were following.

"'Which way, which way', as Alice said." Pegleg was behind me. "As I see it, there are three possibilities: a hearty welcome, jail, or the stew pot. Want to make book on which?"

"It all depends on Gerald. But the fact that he is here at all weighs in our favor. He was sent to find us."

It seemed to me that the gloom became deeper as we shuffled along through the twisting canyon. The walls on either side grew higher. Big boulders were scattered along the way.

A whistling flight of what Pegleg called the flying rats swept low down the canyon, shrilling what must have been a warning. Our guards encircled us, and just in time. We had walked past the opening of an intersecting fissure. Hidden short ears poured out of it in a swarm. Their loud, hooting laughter was particularly chilling in that shadowy setting.

Our big ear guards swung their clubs menacingly. They were outnumbered, they had been trapped — and they were going to die.

"How simple this would be," I said, "if only we had a laser!"

Pegleg slapped his rock hammer into the palm of his left hand.

"If — no, when — I get out of this, I'm going to practice teleporting myself. Fifteen minutes a day. You can

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learn anything if you practice regularly."

"You thought of it late," I said. "You'll never need it more than you do right now. — Try coaxing a gun from the *Stardust*. It's got less bulk than you have. Teleportation is supposed to work both ways."

Gerald was cowering between us, but he was listening. He watched us, and his big ears spread.

"Gun," he said suddenly. He had recognized the word. "Lindy. Gun."

I didn't believe it. He relaxed the band of muscle that sealed his belly pouch. His barely usable fingers grasped and extracted a laser, a real, beautiful laser. He held it out to me. His big protruding eyes glowed trustfully. "Gun," he said.

"Well, by golly," Pegleg said. "I'm a success! And I hadn't even tried yet!"

I examined the gun as best I could in the gloom. Lindy had sent it, so I knew it was okay. Indeed, it felt like my own. I set the adjustments on wide beam and lowest charge.

The short ears were circling just out of reach of Gerals's guards. We could tell that they were getting ready. The giggling speech ran around the circle, growing louder. The big ears widened their own circle. Gerald crouched at our feet, whimpering. he put his flipper hands over his head and made himself into a cowering ball. He seemed to know what was coming.

"Watch it, Roscoe," Pegleg warned. "It's going to be the club throwing routine again. And our guards can't throw theirs, because then they'd be defenseless."

A big short ear whirled his club and launched it like an Olympic hammer, heavy end first. A guard caught it on his own club. Rock chips flew as both weapons shattered. The guard was disarmed, only a rock fragment left in his big bleeding hands. But he stood his ground. His peal of high, clear, mocking laughter bounced from the canyon walls. You would have sworn that it was genuine mirth, instead of the grim defiance that we knew it was. The next club would get him. He now had nothing to parry with.

Another short ear whirled his club.

"Now, now," I said. "Those things are dangerous."

I had leveled the laser. I pressed the stud, and the brilliant cone of light lanced out. We have landed on many worlds, but only twice before had I been forced to this. The result is never pretty.

The would-be club thrower simply glowed for a moment, then charred and crumpled into a shapeless mass, over which blue flames flickered. Not even an odor of cooked flesh came from it. And for a moment there was complete silence; appalled, paralyzed silence. Then the short ears fled, laughing. Or that's what it sounded like.

Gerald's guards drew silently away from us. They packed together into a small huddle, their misshapen hands

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convulsively grasping the stone clubs, their strange eyes glowing in the gloom. But they stayed.

I looked down at Gerald, crouched in a compact knot at my feet, his round head between his thick knees, his flipper-like hands clasped atop of it. I gestured at him, unfortunately with the gun in my hand. The club men shuddered, and one even took a step forward. I hastily turned the gun away.

"Sorry, boys. No harm meant. They're under orders, Pegleg. Committed. Gerald is their charge. They'll protect him to the death, and they probably still figure that their chances of that are pretty good right now."

"The ruler's pet creature? He must be pretty special, to inspire that kind of loyalty."

"From something Lindy said, I suspect he's more than that."

I stirred the grotesque little creature with my foot.

"Okay, Gerald. Up! Short ears all gone. Everything fine. Okay! Okay! Good!"

Slowly Gerald unrolled. He looked up at me, his bulbous eyes fearful. Then they began to glow.

"Fine? Okay? Lindy okay? Good?"

"She would say it if she were here. She sent the gun. You brought it. Thanks, friend."

Gerald clung to my leg with his flippers, looking up at me soulfully. His flabby lips produced mushy syllables.

"Thanks friend. Lindy gun. Fine. Okay. Good."

Sounds began to come from the guards, little trilling notes, subdued giggles. Then one stepped forward and, surely, spoke to Gerald. The sounds were structured, purposeful. The demeanor was respectful. And Gerald certainly understood. He trilled in answer. Then he looked up at me again.

"Thanks friend. Okay?"

The guards were regaining their confidence by the minute. They spread out around us, muscles rolling under their mottled skins as they swung the big stone clubs back and forth. Their protruding eyes picked up and reflected the dim light. Each pair of wide, bat-like ears turned restlessly here and there, like ever-adjusting antennae.

"What do you think, Pegleg?"

Pegleg shrugged.

"What choice have we? We could tell them to go roll their hoops, I suppose, but we need them to get us out of this spelunker's heaven. We could wander around down here for ten years and never find an exit. Let's not make waves. Let's go with them."

I nodded.

"My idea exactly. Gerald's important to the big ears, and, thanks to Lindy, he likes us. She obviously freed him, or persuaded the zoologists to do it. Maybe one good turn deserves another. We're not in danger. The laser has taken care of that."

That big ears were waiting. They

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watched while we palavered, giggling softly through their blubber lips. They watched Gerald, too, as he finally tugged at my jacket.

"Good? Okay?" He seemed anxious.

I waved them forward.

"We're coming," I agreed. "Lead on! Let's go!"

We left the canyon, came out into the open again. On that flat rocky plain, swathed in gloom, nothing moved. It was comforting to note no signs of roving bands of short ears. Nothing friendly, either. Just desolate distance.

The air was a contradiction. It was fresh, and good to breathe. A gentle breeze was blowing, and I noticed that the direction of our march quartered into that wind.

"The trail is in the air, Pegleg," I remarked. "Our friends, if friends they be, are following an air current."

Pegleg took a deep breath.

"You've got it," he said. "I knew it had to be something obvious. They know exactly where they're going, yet there's not a hint of wear underfoot. No markers, and jolly well no sign posts. Those rubber noses probably are much more delicate than ours."

I gave the idea more thought.

"This is a good fresh breeze," I pointed out. "Something has to cause it. I thought we were well beneath the planet's crust, but could we be headed for an exit? Now that they've got Gerald back, are they simply going to let us go?"

We lounged along for a dozen strides. The flap-flap of Gerald's clumsy feet and his wheezing breath were almost the only sounds.

Then: "Too simple," Pegleg said. "This world is extensive. Everything is more complicated than we've seen so far. Gerald is too important for us to be dismissed with a casual 'thank you'. We're going to meet some high-ups before we get out of here. Fortunatly, the little guy seems to really like us — you especially. And that's probably because he relates you to Lindy. It couldn't be your beauty alone."

"I'll overlook the slur, and hope you are right. As for beauty, Gerald is in no position to be critical. None of them are, for that matter."

It was getting lighter. There were evidences, too, that this greater illumination was not a transient thing. Vegetation was beginning to break the stark harshness of the stony landscape, Rocks glistened with moisture. The fresh breeze was growing more humid. High up in the artificial sky, long streamers of mist were flowing.

Light. Water. A tolerable temperature. That's all green plants need. That, and something to grow on, something to cling to. I stopped at the first patch of green that made a show. There was a thin film of mosses on the rocks, and a few dwarfed horsetails pushed up from a gravel pile. All leaned in the direction we were going; toward the light.

Increasingly the light had the quali-

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ty of sunlight, but there was no sun overhead. Instead, in the distance rock walls showed, and from them the yellow rays were reflected as from a mirror.

Pegleg studied the bright surfaces with his binoculars.

"I could be wrong," he said, "but the cliffs ahead seem to be obsidian. Volcanic glass. That's not remarkable or even unexpected, but something else is. The surfaces don't show the normal fracturing you'd expect at the edge of a flow. They look polished. They are reflected light from a source I can't see, and diffusing it over the landscape. Big, big mirrors, Roscoe."

"I can see the need, but it would take some doing." I glanced at the sleek mottled hides and shuffling walks of the big ear guards, each cradling his stone club and naked as the day he was born. They didn't look overly capable of anything scientifically complex. "Are you guessing that they had something to do with rigging those reflectors?"

"Who else? The two species seem to be the only possibilities. We've found no other life with even a modicum of potential."

"Which doesn't prove that it doesn't exist. Only that we haven't found it."

We were heading into still more brightly lighted country. The green was thicker. But nothing else living showed. In that whole rocky landscape the members of our little party were the only things that moved.

Then a small band of bat creatures, whistling shrilly, swept low over us, seemingly headed for the ridge we had come through. Another flock darted by, and another. In a matter of minutes the volume of sound was continuous, and the space above us teemed with circling, swooping fliers.

"Something big," Pegleg said. "Look at our bodyguards."

They were excited, all right. Their expressionless faces did not change, but the chortles and giggles rose in crescendo, they swung their clubs with increased vigor, and they shuffled along ever faster. A loud chuckle from Gerald put a stop to that. He couldn't keep up. So the pace slowed, but the excitement was electric.

We could hear the rhythmic thud and hiss of bare feet before the first contingent came over the near horizon. They came out of the light, showing as tiny marching figures, but in minutes they loomed. Then they were passing on all sides of us, in squads, in companies, in phalanxes. Like marching robots they flowed past, and there seemed to be no end to them.

It's hard to impress Pegleg, but I think this development came close.

"A general movement, Roscoe. Stone age war! Couldn't be anything else. Looking at the peaceful topside of the planet, who could have imagined there would be all these varmints down here?"

I said: "My questions are more

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practical. What triggered this, just at this time? Who called out the militia? Have *we* caused it? Has some *Stardust* party transgressed seriously enough to bring on big retaliation? Stuff like that."

"Somehow, I doubt it." Pegleg leaned against a boulder and watched the marching legions. They split around our little party, closed ranks again when they passed us. "They're not concerned with us. Gerald loves you as well as ever — and if we were the enemy, he'd know."

"Then," I said thoughtfully, "they're moving against the short ears. Evidently the shorties have been doing a lot of border raiding recently. We saw how they operate. Suppose they bush-wacked a big band of geralds, coming back from outside. That could be downright irritating, I'd think. No creatures like to have their children eaten. And the attempt to do in Gerald here must have been the last straw. So the big ears have decided on a War to End War. They're going to put the villians out of business for good."

Pegleg nodded.

"Sounds reasonable. Also, now I bethink me, sounds familiar."

"It should. Earth history abounds with similar examples. Never worked, though. As soon as the populations go up, then the food and space stresses rise, and they have at each other again."

"But never," Pegleg said, "for those stated reasons."

"Naturally not. Each side has only the highest motives. On Earth we're saving the really idealistic ones for Galactic use, when new planets are being invaded and colonized. There'll have to be moral justification for evicting, confining, or even eliminating the local inhabitants of all that nice new living space."

"Life has toughened you," Pegleg sighed. "Your perspectives are badly warped. Why, we couldn't think of taking sides even here, in this little local war. There's an ISC ruling against it. You know that."

"*No interference in the lives and affairs of an aware species.*" I quoted the ruling. It was basic to all our activities, and Johnny Rasmussen not only supported it, he believed in it. There was, however, an escape clause of sorts.

"We can protect ourselves, though. I would never have any other reason for war-like behavior."

Pegleg grinned his sour grin.

"I'll support that. Years ago you killed the plesiosaur that had my leg for lunch, and no one thought it too drastic. But then, *it* wasn't an aware form. I guess, though, if the short ears can kill us, we can kill them back."

"Killing is rather permeanent," I said. "Anyhow, the *Stardust* is purely an explorer ship. For the invaders and settlers who come after us, the rules are bound to be different."

"All in the future," Pegleg said. "Right now, I'll be happy not to get caught in the middle of this ruckus.

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Matter of fact, I can't see enough difference between the two sides to feel strongly one way or the other. I'd just like to find Jim Peters and get out of here. They've undoubted been fighting for many a generation. *I've* no objection."

"Nor I. As we've said, the difference seemed to be mainly a question of ears anyway. — The troops are thinning out a bit. Maybe we can move."

I motioned to the big club men, and took several steps. They hesitated, then clustered around Gerald, giggling in low tones. He backed me up. It was ridiculous to see that little round creature wave his flippers and the mottled giants obey.

We were walking in bright sunshine. The red and blue hides of the club men glinted. Their shuffling pace seemed more robot-like than ever, and in spite of the endless motion I felt again as though we were alone — alone in a nightmare world.

The sun was warm, but a cooling airflow kept the temperature in check. There was a faint, strange reek from the bodies of the thousands of marching creatures, and a stronger smell of crushed plant tissue as their big flat feet plowed through the now common patches of flourishing horsetails.

"Sunshine in a cave," Pegleg mused. "A wind blowing where no wind is supposed to blow. Evidently there's a technology that can bring these things to pass, yet they go to war naked, swinging clubs. Sort it out for us, Roscoe."

"Naturally I can't, but I've been thinking. Your last fact may be the best evidence that these are superior beings. Civilized, if you like an abused term."

"I admit I don't see how." Pegleg glanced down at Gerald, who was trudging along manfully, feet flapping, breath wheezing. "It would seem to me that in a war it's smart to put your best foot forward. Use the biggest guns you've got. These creatures build, control energy fields, reflect sunlight where they want it. In fact, it occurs to me that all their energy may be stellar. They've learned how to trap and use their primary's light. I'll bet they could sweep this field with concentrated heat rays and wipe out everything. Neatly. No fuss, no muss."

"Pointless," I contended. "That's the savage, the barbaric way. *This* way, only the ordinary people get killed. And there are plenty of them. Always will be. Everybody gets a chance for personal participation, maybe even glory. Patriotism is thus kept high. The borders are kept resonably stable, and each nation, tribe or whatever can maintain its space, keep its economic pressures under control."

"The division between cynicism and realism is a thin line," Pegleg grinned. "You don't think that 'one man, one vote' pertains here, I take it."

"Naturally not. That would be silly. Then you *would* have universal destruction. Only competent minds

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can control a successful operation. Counting noses never solved anything yet, unless you first classify the noses. Somewhere here there's a ruling class, a class with the intelligence to make decisions."

"And they're not out here swinging clubs, you'll tell me."

"You know it already. They'll be relatively few in number, and they and their offspring will be valued."

"And Gerald —?"

"Right! He's one of their pups — maybe one with very high-class genes indeed. It was pure chance that Jim's collectors happened to pick him up instead of one of the ordinary kind. He was missed. The other might not have been."

"Sounds pretty," Pegleg said. "You can't possibly know, but I like your confident tone."

"Logic," I said. "Deductive reasoning. Add to that my gift of divination—"

Pegleg grinned.

We had been moving along steadily, at Gerald speed, against the grain of the now thinning warriors, talking, speculating as we walked. So the horizon line changed abruptly, before we noticed. The ranked roofs of buildings rose, tier on tier, seeming to sprout directly out of the rocky landscape. As we drew nearer, the view became almost Earth conventional. It was a city, of course, and a pretty extensive one.

Yellow sunlight glinted and flashed from the multicolored stonework. Towers speared upward, punctuating the almost continuous masses of flat-topped construction. And, as we came over a slight roll in the terrain, we could see that a wall encircled the whole, a wall of massive proportions. The total effect was Earth oriental, but with a contradictory, alien feel. As well it might be. These were not constructions thought of by man.

Pegleg brought out his binoculars and swept the view ahead.

"Gates," he said. "Six in view, and fighters still pouring out of some of them. And that wall goes on and on. This is quite a village, Roscoe."

"I'm adjusting," I said. "This is a nation of millions of beings. And, likely, the short ears are as numerous. Two civilizations. Obviously advanced technologies. And yet, still engaged in a completely primitive interaction. War! Strife! We've never found them missing."

"Maybe," Pegleg said carefully, "maybe they're necessary. Maybe our whole concept of ultimate peace and brotherhood is negative on the face of it. Only necessity provokes action. Only action develops strength. Competition makes for growth, adaptability. Nothing can win or fail if there ain't a contest."

He grinned at me. "How'm I doing?"

I slapped him on the shoulder, and the club men came to their feet, clubs swinging.

"The Peace Movement would hang

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you," I said, "but you have just qualified for honorary membership in the Galactic brotherhood of ecologists."

"It's my contacts," Pegleg said gravely. "I learn by being associated with wisdom."

"Reasonable," I agreed. "Let's get ourselves on over to the wall and make some more contacts. I'm still a mite uneasy about what they have in mind for us — but no point in putting it off. In all the landings we have made, this set-up comes closest to an organized city."

"Which may include an organized hoosegow for buttinskis, or a one-way trip to an abattoir."

I stepped off, and Gerald got to his short crooked legs almost with a sigh. I looked back at the little fellow and he chuckled tiredly.

"Poor little guy. He hasn't metamorphosed far enough for this kind of activity. He's pooped."

He made it to the wall, though, and there any doubt of his importance was promptly dispelled. Out of a great arched gateway a whole company of big club-swingers came leaping and dancing. The volume of laughter rolled around us, punctuated with deep-toned chortles and high-pitched whoops of mirth. Except, of course, that's not what it was.

Four muscular big ears, conspicuous by the fact that their body mottling was almost entirely red, came under the arch, and the dancers parted to let them through. Each had a strand of rope over a shoulder, attached to a woven, hammock-like carrier suspended in the midst of them. They laid the structure on the ground in front of Gerald. The little fellow looked about with dignity for a moment or two, then stepped aboard. He waved a flipper and they lifted him. We could see him slump back gratefully.

His carriers stepped off smartly and marched back under the arch. The dancing club-swingers followed them. Then, to our astonishment, the huge gates swung smoothly shut and we were left standing alone, our mouths slightly open.

"Well," Pegleg said. He made a seat of the nearest boulder, and absently flexed his plastic knee. "Of all the things I did expect, the least likely was being abandoned like an orphaned kitten, sittin' out here in this improbable sunshine with my teeth in my mouth. What gives, Roscoe?"

I shook my head.

"We're definitely not invited. Doesn't make sense. They allowed Gerald to come and look for us. Undoubtedly, they have Jim Peters. They know full well we can't find our way back to the surface again, and they'd probably block us if we tried."

I patted the laser swinging by my right thigh. It felt good and familiar there, for I had long since verified that it was my own. It had a full charge. If I wanted to go through those ponderous gates, I knew I could make a way. But I

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couldn't justify it. Not in the face of the ISC ruling I couldn't.

I occupied another boulder.

"Let's just sit here," I proposed. "I packed a few of those poisonous looking green cakes for emergency rations. Let's eat 'em slowly, keep the talk going, and sweep everything with binoculars. Maybe they'll finally be impelled to do something."

Pegleg accepted a cake and bit into it.

"I only hope," he said sourly, "that they aren't impelled to anything reckless."

It may have been disconcerting to them. We'll never know. But finally there was action.

A small postern by the big gates swung open and three big club men came through. The creatures approached us slowly, and, it seemed to me, with a certain dignity. Pegleg picked that up right away.

"This is ceremony," he said. "The boy in front hasn't even got a club. So this is a special move."

The creature in advance stopped several strides from us. His bulbous eyes swung from one of us to the other. Finally he seemed to settle on me. He looked at me steadily for a moment, his lugubrious, doughy face never changing. Then he barely opened his flabby lips and gave a great burst of laughter.

"I can't look that funny," I growled. "You're no outstanding beauty yourself, you know."

The creature gestured, and one of the club men stepped forward. He swung his club in the figure eight motion they all used, then deftly reversed the weapon and held it out to me, handle end first.

I hesitated. Plainly, he expected me to take the club, but I was dubious. By accepting it, what would I be letting myself in for? A familiar ritual? A challenge? There was no way to know.

"Take it," Pegleg urged. "I think he's offering you a present. That's no ordinary, bone-breaking type of club. It's a work of art."

When they closed around it, my fingers confirmed that. I kept my eyes on the humanoids, while my hands grasped cold stone, neatly tapered to fit my grasp and polished to an almost sensuous smoothness. It was slenderer than the war clubs we had been seeing, but it was still heavy.

A wave of the head man's hand and the other club man stepped forward, faced Pegleg, and went through the same routine.

Pegleg accepted the offered club without hesitation, and I had to grin when he tried to swing it.

"Who-o! Fancy carrying one of these all day! But ain't they purty?"

They were. A rock man could appreciate them better than I could, but I recognized master craftsmanship when I saw it. They were made of streaked red and white quartz, unflawed. The tapered hand grips and the delicately turned barrels flowed into each other,

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while the polished surfaces were smooth as velvet. In the end of each handle was a single great flashing gem, clear as water.

"Diamonds, Roscoe. If we ever get strapped for cash, we can hock these for plenty."

"Always provided," I said, "that we get back to where there's a market."

"Somehow," Pegleg said, "I'm encouraged. I don't feel any antagonism at all. I suppose it's because we did right by Gerald. Maybe the boss man there is his papa."

The club men turned, the man in charge made a beckoning gesture, and they strode away toward the gate. "Let's go!" I said, and we followed them. But only the head man went back through the postern. The others continued along the wall and motioned us to come along. Baffled, we had no choice. The postern gate had closed with a good final sound.

We didn't have far to go. A few hundred feet beyond the arch the club men turned into the base of one of those cylindrical towers that punctuated the masses of flat-topped houses. I wasn't surprised at the dim red light, nor at the circular ramp boring upward.

"No guest of honor status for us, Pegleg. I think we're being kicked out of the country, with thanks."

Pegleg's chuckle was echoed by our guides, dim on the next loop of the ramp above us. They moved steadily upward, and we soon needed all our breath for climbing. When the daybright opening suddenly grew over our heads, it was a welcome sight.

The club men waved us past them, the opening closed, and where it had been was undisturbed boulder field. The humanoids had not followed us out. A faint chortle as the rocks rearranged themselves was the last evidence we had of them.

It was late afternoon. The yellow rays of the sun Methane slanted from near a horizon suddenly farther away and more familiar than the restricted boundaries of the world beneath our feet. And down the slope, no more than a mile away, the *Stardust* lay prone at the edge of the horsetail jungle.

"Home again!" Pegleg almost murmured. "Now that does look good. Just down below us there is where Ursula painted her portrait."

For a few moments we simply stood, catching our breaths and adjusting. I found myself looking almost with disbelief at the heavy, beautiful artifact in my hands. It was the only tangible evidence of the world from which we had just come. Otherwise, the past two or three days — how long had it been? — might well have been something imagined, something dreamed.

"Jim!" I remembered suddenly. "They fired us out of there and we never got a clue as to what happened to him."

Pegleg's narrow face grew cold, but

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only for a moment. Then he relaxed.

"We're reaching," he said. "They sent *us* back, didn't they?"

He flicked the switch of his belt communicator. The reassuring hum came, and in a moment the speaker crackled.

"Price."

"Hello, Stony. Williams. We are in time for dinner, yes?"

"Pegleg!" We could hear Stony breathing hard as he composed himself. He never liked to appear surprised. "Have a nice holiday? Jim Peters came home without you, and has been telling incredible lies. You say 'we', so I suppose Roscoe's with you?"

"Present, Stony." I had activated my own set. "Tell Lindy I'm okay, will you? She might be interested."

"She'll at least be glad to know if her experiment worked. She sent you a gun. Did you get it?"

"As long-shot as it seems, I did. You tell her I think she is a nice lady, and that I'll be home shortly We're only a mile or so up the hill."

Within minutes the *Stardust* had spat two scoutboats into the air, and they were sweeping low over us. I knew that their lasers were bracketing us on all sides, commanding the rocky terrain around us. Any last minute change of plan on the part of the humanoids would have been very bad judgement. That's the way Johnny Rasmussen thinks. He leaves nothing to chance.

"No sedan chairs, no bearers," Pegleg grumbled as we clambered down the slope. "They treated Gerald better than this, and they're nothing but savages."

"I'm afraid you can't support that last statement," I said. "When I'm rested and not hungry I'm going to regret not having a chance to tour that city. Savages didn't build that."

"A point," Pegleg admitted. "They are fighting a war, too, just like civilized species. I still wonder why large ears or small ears should be a killing matter. There're no other differences that I can see. Why don't they live together as brothers and sisters — and maybe in time have offspring with nice normal ears — like mine?"

I started to laugh, but choked it back and contented myself with a grin. It will be a long time before I'll tolerate vocal merriment.

"The ear business isn't a reason; it's an excuse, as you well know. As for the wars, they're necessary, as you also know."

"In order to be an ecologist, you have to have a mean, low, practical mind," Pegleg murmured. "I know what you're saying. Population density must be controlled, and war is the primitive, old-fashioned way. Disease and malnutrition help, too, but advanced technologies reduce their effectiveness. Anyway, there's no glory in starving to death."

"Don't I know it!" I said fervently. "I'm closer to it this minute than you non-bulky types would believe. I hope

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the table is set and the fatted calf roasting. For that I don't mind this last little walk."

"I could eat," Pegleg said, "but if it's not quite ready, a small glass of bourbon would tide me over."

"Seems to me," I growled, "that this is where I came in."

In point of fact, as far as the nether world of Methane II was concerned, the circle *had* closed. We knew that far below us, on shadowy plains unimaginable from the planet's surface, hordes of club-swinging patriots were battering each other to bloody fragments for ears and fatherland. There wouldn't, I suspected, be a winner. The chances were good that there wouldn't be a loser, either. This was something that had been going on for ages.

What would result would be a relieving of tensions, a stabilizing of borders, a heightened sense of unity in each 'nation'. Many on both sides would lose their lives, and even those, I speculated, might not be wasted. In this world, what other red meat was there?

I stumbled along down the slope, not then realizing that this was all we'd ever know. We can't interfere in the activities of an aware species. Though we spent more weeks describing and recording the planet's surface, its advanced cultures remained closed to us. It was frustrating, but then we're used to that too. Everything we observed, everything we suspect, was duly recorded, as always. *(ISC Annals. Vols. 106-107, A.D. 2128. The log of the Stardust.)*

The *Stardust* loomed close, a vast, gray metallic cylinder, stretching far along the edge of the horsetail forest. To the creatures of this world it may well have been completely unbelievable. But to us it was home, and it was beautiful.

In my life one thing is more beautiful still, and she was waiting for me at the entrance port nearest our quarters. She came across the lichen sward with her graceful stride, surely the most magnificent woman on this or any other world.

I swept her up and held her for a long moment. And Lindy's kisses are always and forever new. She's why, no matter where I go, I'll always, somehow, come back.

"Roscoe," she said sternly, but the tears were rolling down her cheeks, "haven't I *told* you? Never go *anywhere* without your gun!"

I pushed the crisp red curls back from her temples and looked, as though I had never seen them before.

"Love your ears," I said.

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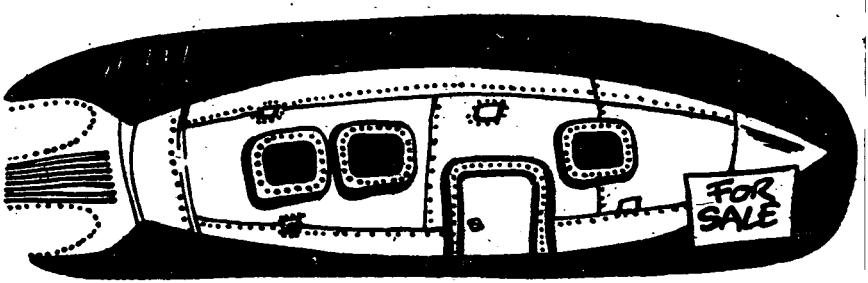

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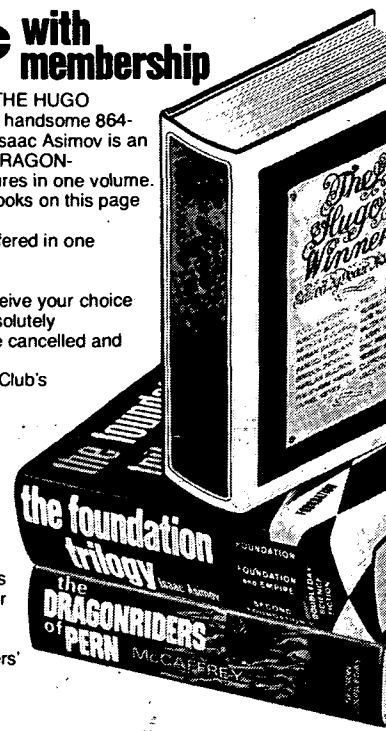

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